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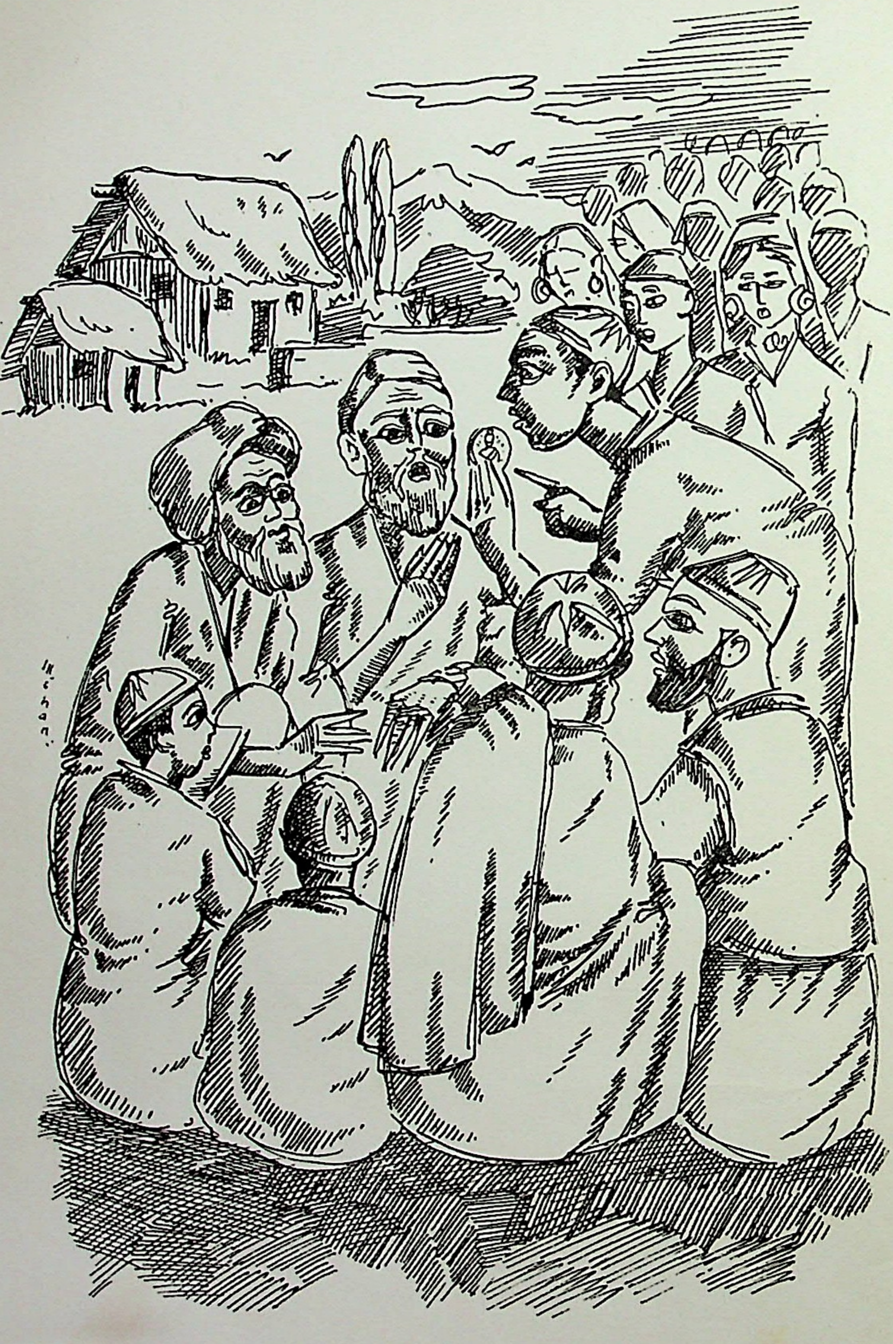
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Resident of Sheshyar,
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To Manzoor Ahmed Darkoo
Khanyar Sgr

Folk Tales from Kashmir



The Precious Present

FOLK TALES FROM KASHMIR

by

S. L. SADHU

with a Foreword by G.M. Sadiq,
Minister for Education,
Jammu and Kashmir

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Foreword

SITUATED on an important highway of learning, and culture, Kashmir attained eminence in the domain of art and letters in the past. In philosophy and mysticism, poetry and aesthetics, grammar and history, our ancestors took long strides towards what is still accepted as an enviable standard of perfection.

For various causes the creative urge of the people suffered a peculiar set-back and several generations of Kashmiris lapsed into muted backwardness. During this period it was left to eminent Western scholars to introduce Kashmir to the civilized world through translation and interpretation of the literary and artistic wealth of earlier ages. Apart from their value to the outside world these works gave a sense of purpose and pride to our generation.

Interest in Kashmir's history and culture rose to a peak in the months following the independence of India. A resurgence of creative activity in all parts of this multilingual region was consequently stimulated. Along with the development of recognized literary forms in what were hitherto regarded barren languages, folk arts have come to claim a good deal of attention and patronage. The unprecedented pace of education during the last few years bids fair to quicken this resurgence of the creative urge. In this context the publication of Kashmiri folk tales in English translation in the present form is of some significance.

This volume of folk tales presents many of the stories generally current in Kashmir today, some of them indeed with many parallels in other parts of India and outside. *Manut* and *Panzuv* or *Toh Thug* and *Mengan Thug* occur

frequently in the idiom of our conversation everyday, and *Himal* and *Nagrai*, *Shabrang* and *Akanandun* are referred to in our parlance off and on. Though the tales are generally the product of the imagination of our people, several of them can at once be identified by local readers as built round the nucleus of an actual event to which the tale is true in substance and spirit.

The author of the present work has, by and large, bypassed tales based on fantasy, romance and magic, though such material exists in abundance in our folklore. He has also eschewed tales of a patently foreign character. There is, thus, a ring of modernity about them which sheds light on the modes of thought and ways of living of our people. The efforts of the author are commendable and I have no doubt that his book will be read and appreciated widely.

Srinagar,
30 June, 1961

G. M. Sadiq

Preface

NINE hundred years ago a remarkable collection of stories called *Kathasaritsagara*, the "Ocean of Stories", was produced in Kashmir. Somadeva, its author, is said to have included in this tome many stories which he had heard from others and which, in fact, had their origin in folk-literature. The *Kathasaritsagara*, which may justly be called a treasure of folk tales, has had considerable influence on countries which were in close touch with India during the Middle Ages.

The first collection of Kashmiri folk tales in English was brought out by the late Rev. John Hinton Knowles towards the end of the last century. Sometime later, a renowned scholar, the late Sir Auriel Stein, published another collection of this kind. *Hatim's Tales*, as this latter is called, is a collection of tales in verse and prose recited in Kashmiri for the savant by one Hatim who was an oilman by profession. These two works can by no means be said to exhaust the harvest of tales garnered in the fertile minds of the people. The present editor has endeavoured to collect some of the more interesting tales current in the valley of Kashmir which, but for two exceptions, have not appeared earlier.

Tales, myths, sagas and other narratives comprise perhaps the most interesting part of the literature named "Folklore", a term coined in 1846 by W.J. Thoms to designate the traditional learning of the uncultured classes of civilized nations. This is not the place to go into minute details on the subject. Suffice it to say that folk tales comprise a respectable volume of literature in all languages which is being explored with increasing interest

everywhere. The earliest tales of this kind are traced to about 2800 B.C. in Egypt.

There is an unmistakable similarity in many folk tales of countries as far apart as Kashmir and France or China and Sweden. The obvious conclusion is that they have all been influenced by a common stock of tales which appear as variants in different languages. Apart from this there is the same affinity between the folk tales of different countries as in their fables, legends, myths, apologues, etc. There is, therefore, nothing to be surprised at if some of the folk tales of Kashmir have close parallels in other countries.

Several tales in this volume are based on incidents centering on real persons. By and large, however, the tales portray a large variety of men and women, both individuals and types, and project peoples' beliefs, customs, ideals, preferences and prejudices in all their rich variety as few other literary forms can do. As a matter of fact they impart meaning and substance to culture as it is crystallized in our day-to-day living. In this sense they are allied to myths. "Myths," according to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, "are not created out of nothing .... It [a myth] is always the covering, the shell, to a kernel of truth contained inside .... Folk tales are the myths of the race." Many tales in this volume could without doubt be called the myths of the race living in this land.

The present editor would feel his labours amply rewarded if the folk tales presented here quicken the curiosity of the reader for longer and wider excursions in this domain.

The author considers it a privilege to express his gratitude to Mr. G. M. Sadiq, Minister for Education, Jammu and Kashmir, for his generous response to the request to write a foreword to this book. He is indebted to Rev. W.A.W. Jarvis, of the St. Stephen's College, Delhi, who read the proofs of a portion of the book and made several

valuable suggestions for its improvement. Thanks are due also to Mr. R. C. Dhar, Librarian, Research Department, Srinagar for the assistance rendered to the writer in the preparation of this book, and to Mr. Mohan Ji Raina, who produced the illustrations inserted in this book.

S. L. SADHU

Contents

The Precious Present

THIS story takes the reader to a village on the bank of the Wular, one of the largest fresh water lakes in India. Many years ago the only approach to the village was over mountain tracks or across the lake which though alluring to the eye when placid is impassable when otherwise. Consequently the village was practically cut off and no outsider visited it unless it was absolutely indispensable for him to do so. Nor were the villagers very curious about the rest of the world. God had given them enough land to grow maize, pulses, and a few vegetables and the lake supplied them fish and water-nuts (caltrops), the kernels of which formed their staple diet. There were the old shops exchanging salt and cloth for dried fish, caltrops, maize and ghee, and currency was hardly necessary. Coins were not in circulation in this remote corner, and if ever they were, they were mostly of copper, or other lower denominations. It was an age when even government officials were paid their salaries mostly in kind, in terms of *khirwars* (ass-loads) of cereals. In short, nobody in the village had ever seen the silver rupee with the effigy of Victoria, Queen of Britain and Empress of India.

It so happened that by some mysterious process a silver rupee of the above description found its way into the village. It caused a great sensation there and everybody was eager to have a sight of it. Before long the matter came to the notice of the *nambardar,* the headman, and the coin was handed over to him for safe custody till he decided how to deal with this novelty. He pondered over it for a day and a night, a pretty long day and a dark sleepless night, and announced his decision the next morning.

"Brethren," he said, "this is the first coin of the kind that has ever been seen by any one of us. It is stamped with the figure of our most respected ruler. (At this his hand went involuntarily to his forehead by way of saluting the ruler, his listeners following suit.) God grant our ruler prosperity and victory always, and humiliation to our enemies! It is most befitting that we make a present of this respected and honoured token to His Highness in person...."

The proposal was no sooner made than accepted. The headman of the village was regarded as the wisest man. He gave them full details as to how such a present should be placed before the ruler for his acceptance. The gift was to be placed in a palanquin carried by six worthy elders of the village whom he nominated. They got a really dainty palanquin and decorated it with whatever choice cloth they could get. Spreading a finely woven blanket inside they covered it with a piece of silk that somebody possessed. The headman then called all the village elders to the palanquin. Young men and little urchins were there already. In the presence of such an august gathering they placed the rupee inside the palanquin and drew the curtains as if it carried a delicate bride on her way to her husband's home. The capital was to be reached by boat. A *doongha* stood ready at the quay equipped with all requirements for the journey. The palanquin was lifted to the accompaniment of delightful songs, portending success, sung by village women and deposited gently in the *doongha*. The boatman pushed off and made for the south where the capital lay, the villagers shouted their good wishes after it and the headman gesticulated *au revoir* when the boat reached the mouth of the river.

It is a tiresome journey going upstream. The palanquin was given a seat of honour and nobody could sit or stand with his back to it. At night they lit a lamp and kept it alight till the dawn, and took their turns at the watch. Whoever asked them the purpose of their journey south

was told that they were carrying a precious present for His Highness. They did not reveal the nature of it at all.

On the morning of the third day when they came to the outskirts of the capital they decided to dispense with the boat and carry the palanquin on their shoulders. Barefoot, with legs wrapped tightly with woollen *puttees*, and their backs with cotton scarves in the manner of ancient courtiers, four of them lifted the palanquin on their shoulders while one preceded it with a flag. The headman walked humbly behind. They were all merry as befitted a deputation waiting upon the ruler with a precious present and impressed every passerby with their festive appearance. At the octroi-post the tax-collectors wanted to have a look into the palanquin but the headman protested, saying, "Nobody except His Highness will cast a look inside"; and the guards gave in.

The small procession had to pass through the principal streets of the capital before they could reach Shergarhi, the palatial residence of the ruler, built on the left bank of the Jhelum. The news had spread fairly quick throughout the city and many people were curious to know what precious gift it was that had brought these doughty folk over such a long distance. The village folk reached the palace gate and made their purpose known to the guards. The captain of the guards got orders from His Highness to admit them within and to show utmost hospitality. With loud shouts wishing victory and prosperity to His Highness the little procession entered the gate of the palace. They felt amply recompensed when treated as the guests of their ruler.

Within the palace premises they, of course, displayed greater solicitude in according respect and obeisance to the precious but secret gift inside the palanquin. The guards and other palace officials were highly intrigued about the secret but dared not ask them for fear of offending their sense of etiquette. Meanwhile, the villagers fully basked in the lavish sunshine of the ruler's hospitality

and were keenly conscious of the honour which had thus fallen to their lot. "What reward will His Highness feel too high for us when he receives us in audience and accepts the gift ?" whispered the headman into the ears of the gratified elders.

In the afternoon His Highness got up from his siesta and desired the elders to be admitted to his presence. The minister-in-waiting, the prime minister and other dignitaries of the State were in attendance. The headman entered barefoot and made obeisance. He was followed by the elders bearing the palanquin. "Sire !" began the headman "this humble servant who has the signal honour of standing before his ruler and father is the *nambardar* of the village...on the bank of the Wular lake, famous for its fish, caltrops and deadly waves. Along with these men who are worthy elders of the said village this loyal servant has covered the distance with a happy heart on account of the pleasant and honourable duty before us. We crave your permission, our liege and father, to place this *nazar* at your Highness' blessed feet."

"Our good men," returned the ruler, "we are touched by your affection and loyalty which prompted you to come from such a distant place to offer your *nazar*. We desire that it be placed before us."

The headman drew the curtain and thrust his hand into the palanquin. He appeared to be somewhat perplexed and raised all the four curtains. Whispers were exchanged by all the elders who began to fumble in the folds of the blanket and rummage into the corners of the palanquin. The *nazar* was not forthcoming. Quite a few minutes passed thus while the villagers completed a thorough search for the coin inside the palanquin. The prime minister said, "Be quick rustics, His Highness has urgent matters of State to attend to." But the rustics could not help the matter. In their rustic hilarity they had so carried the palanquin as to suffer the precious gift to slip somewhere. It was too late now to mend their folly and

the headman made the submission : "Our liege and father, we have unfortunately dropped the *nazar* somewhere unwittingly."

The situation thus took a serious turn. The ministers were of one mind in looking upon the incident as an insult to the person and throne of the ruler. Punishment could easily be awarded for such an act. "What astounds me," declared the prime minister, "is the daring of these uncouth rustics. To come right to the august presence of His Highness and try to cover their crime under the frivolous excuse that they had dropped the *nazar* somewhere! Your Highness, let them be taken to the prison and dealt with according to law," he submitted.

The village elders looked like sheep at the gate of the shambles though the headman bore this sorrow with exemplary fortitude. "My head upon your Highness' feet!" declared the headman turning towards the ruler, "make but a gesture and this humble servant will offer his heart for you to feed upon. Who is there so unworthy of his salt as to harbour anything but esteem, honour and affection for our lord, liege and father! Who can be so daring as to put his head into the mouth of a lion! Our Holy Book says that God Almighty is *Karim* (merciful). I invoke your mercy, our respected father, and seek permission to explain the whole case."

The ruler was gifted with a good deal of commonsense. He saw at once that they were simple but good-natured folk who had come from a remote village and meant nothing but loyalty and affection. On the insistence of his councillors he devised a plan to test their intentions. The villagers were placed in a cell and were supplied with all requirements to enable them to cook their food. Instead of being given a burning faggot or live coal they were given a box of safety matches. They did not know what a match stick was and could not cook their meal. They ate part of the rations raw and the rest was kept intact.

When the ruler heard this news through the captain

of the guards he was convinced of their innocence. He called the villagers, heard the whole story and had a hearty laugh at their simple faith. He assured the headman that the gift was as good as accepted. In fact he gave them a rupee and received it back as *nazar*. The villagers felt highly gratified. Further, they were treated as guests once again and dismissed the next morning with suitable gifts. In addition, the land rent in their village was reduced. The villagers departed merrily shouting slogans. Back in the village they narrated the tale about how they had been saved from the very brink of destruction. The tale spread to neighbouring villages and to remote ones till it was imprinted on the minds of men.

The Devil Outwitted

ONCE there lived a young man in a village. He had no land of his own but worked on the farms of several landlords one after another and thus picked up a living. He was handsome and industrious and entered into matrimony as could be expected. Fortunately his wife was an uncommonly good one. She had attractive features, a strong physique and a sweet disposition—a rare combination. She shared the burdens of her husband and made him happy and somewhat prosperous.

Once, while she was returning from the spring with two pitchers of water—one upon another—on her head in the company of several other women, she and her husband came in for a poignant taunt from her companions. How and why it started is needless to state but in effect they told her that they were landless beggars and had little stake in the village. When she reported the matter to her husband the "earth seemed to slip from under his feet." He had all along been feeling that the landed class, even those petty peasants who could not pay their rent to the State, did not treat him as an equal because he had no land to call his own. The land gave a subtle but respectable status to a tiller of the soil. Minus a piece of land of his own he was like a woman unable to get a husband. Apart from his own feelings on the subject, he was now upset that his wife had got hurt by the unsophisticated though callous observations of the village women-folk.

The peasant was gifted with youth, health and strength. Said he to his wife, "Is that what is worrying you? I never thought that my wife would be upset by such idle gossip. Anyway, before the year is out, you will also be the owner

of a small farm of your own."

She felt somewhat reassured but could not see how it would be possible for him to implement what he said. "May be," she thought, "he has some resources unknown to me." She had grounds for her fears because, as far as she knew, he had had no savings. As a cultivator he was entitled to a share ranging from one half to one third of the produce of the farm he worked on. But prices of agricultural produce were low and did not leave anything by way of surplus. His savings had gone away on the occasion of his marriage when he had to make a settlement on his wife. She also helped her husband in earning their living, but soon came extra mouths to feed in the shape of their offspring and their affairs did not go far on the road to prosperity.

The peasant approached the local *patwari* with a present and told him everything. The *patwari* was mighty glad that this latest client would bring him a little money in one form or another.

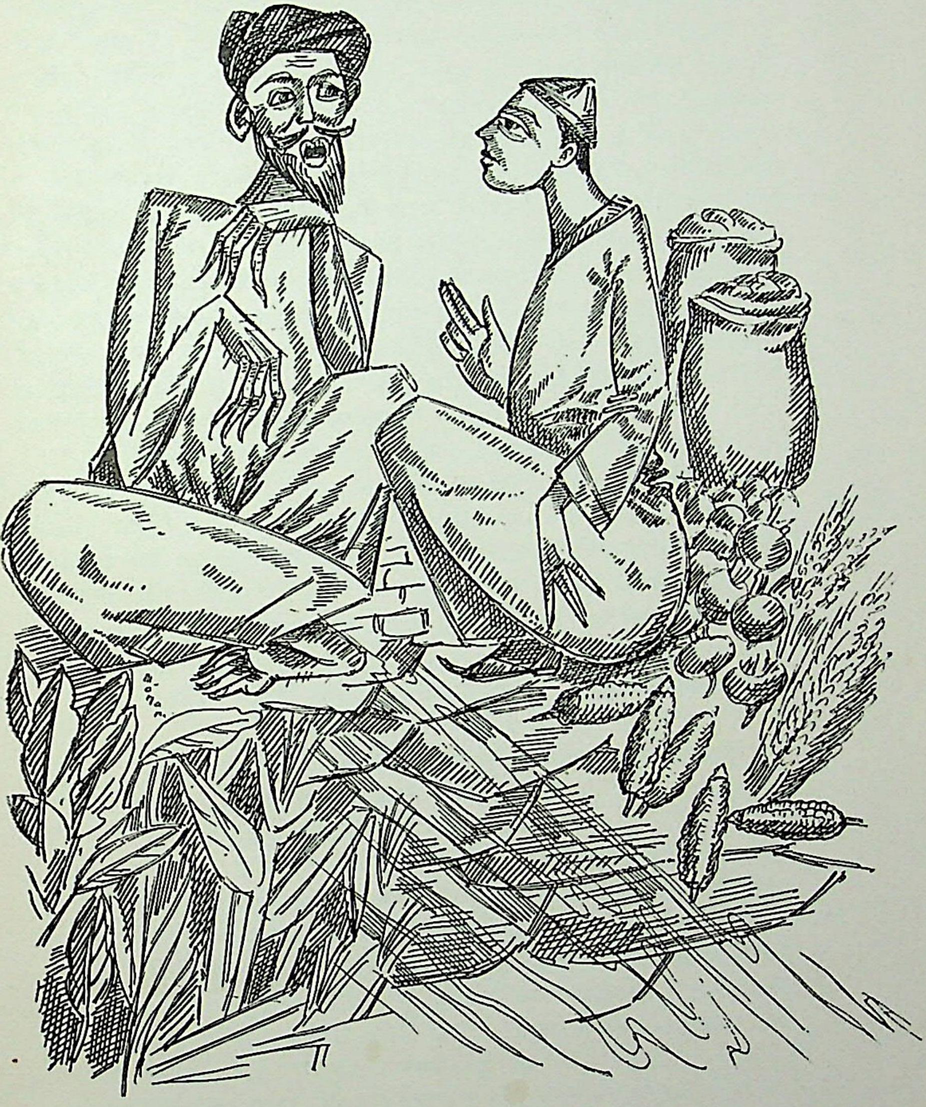
"I shall make you a peasant-owner" he assured him.

"But I have nothing to purchase it with" rejoined the peasant.

"Don't worry", said the *patwari*. "When I have given you my word, I shall prove true to it."

The *patwari* explained to him how he could become a landholder without having to pay the price on the understanding, of course, that the young man would render adequate service to the official. There was a piece of land on the outskirts of the village which was entered as barren in the revenue records. The *patwari* advised the young man to reclaim it and assured him that he would help him in owning it in course of time.

The young peasant set about his task with might and main. He was helped by his wife and in a few weeks the land was practically fit for cultivation. The peasant was making preparations for sowing seeds. Late one night he was about to return home from this newly-acquired



The Devil Outwitted

farm when he found a hen with a number of chicks occupying his path. Surprised to see this brood at such a late hour he was about to make his way when a flock of sheep came within his sight, and he was obliged to go from one side to another and suffer much inconvenience on this account. He walked thus for quite a long time, up hill and down dale, getting his clothes rent by brambles, or suffering from a fall now and then, but he nowhere got near his house. It was dark and he could not make out whereabouts he had been led astray. After a while he saw three or four men coming with a lantern from a distance. He came to know through them that he had strayed quite a few miles from his home to which they escorted him. "It is the devil's doing," they told him.

The next evening when he was about to start from his farm he had some more experiences which the devil alone could cause. He planted his pocket-knife into the ground and sat down. Lo ! the devil came forward in the guise of a man with his heels in front and toes pointing backward. The young peasant did not in the least lose his presence of mind.

"What can I do for you, my dear Sir ?" he addressed the visitant.

"You have been tilling my farm," replied the other.

"Is that so, but the *patwari*. . . ."

"To hell with the dishonest rogue!"

"Never mind, my dear Sir, I have all my life been cultivating land for people. Could your honour get a better tenant than this humble servant?"

The devil obviously felt flattered with the respectful attitude of the peasant. "I have no special prejudice against you. Only I thought that a tenant would take the permission of the owner," said he.

"For that transgression I crave the indulgence of your honour's generosity," submitted the peasant. "And what rent may this humble servant be commanded to pay?" he asked.

Oblivious of the ironical attitude of the peasant, the devil was taken in and demanded the same rent as other well-known landlords.

"Indeed, Sir, I shall feel it a great honour to render unto your worship one half of the crop, but which half it would please your highness to accept, I pray this humble servant may be commanded, the upper half or the lower half."

"Of course, the upper half," said the devil ingenuously.

"By all means, your highness. When the crop is about to be harvested, will it please you to come and have your share?"

The devil was mighty pleased and disappeared. The peasant left for home with a light heart.

He did not tell anything about the visitation to his wife but decided to raise turnips on his land. The seed was sown and in good time the leaves raised their head from the earth. The devil saw it thus and felt pleased that at last through his wisdom he was making a fortune through labour not his own. Then came harvest time. The peasant was up and doing, cutting with his sickle the leaves from turnips. A big heap of leaves he piled for the devil and the turnips his wife carried home. While the devil was deliberating how best to dispose of the produce of his land, the leaves started turning yellow and brown. He carried them to the market but the prospective customers only winked to each other or grinned at the wisdom of the seller. "Is it a conspiracy or what?" said the devil to himself, deliberating over his failure to dispose of the turnip leaves.

He came to know ultimately that he had cut a sorry figure on account of his ignorance of farming. "For once this young peasant has scored over me. But none of this more. I shall teach him a lesson now," thought he.

The next sowing season came and the peasant once again asked the devil "Which part of the crop will it please your honour to have?" The devil did not like to give the peasant the impression that he had been worsened and that he was smarting under the discomfiture.

He simply told him that he would take the lower portion.

"By all means, your worship, and this humble servant shall work with utmost zeal to his entire capacity to win the approbation of your honour," said the peasant.

The devil was highly pleased with this unctuous verbiage.

This time the peasant sowed barley and in due course the entire farm was full of green waving crop. It pleased the devil to watch this emerald spot, particularly when the wind forced it to bow to him in courtesy. Gradually the virgin stalks were heavy with ears, and the crop turned yellowish and golden. It was a bumper crop that the peasant raised.

Once again he and his wife got busy with harvesting. They plied their sickles deftly and did a good job of it. Sawing the stalks into two the peasant took all the ears and the grain leaving the stubble and the roots for the devil. When the latter came to collect it, the peasant respectfully submitted that the entire share was kept for the rightful owner, untouched. And the devil was so glad! But in the market they laughed at his stupidity and he understood that he had been duped once more.

"I must teach this fellow a lesson" said he to himself and he felt relieved to throw the bundle of stubble into the stream. By experience he had found that it was either the root or the top that mattered. To eliminate all risks he determined to have both as his share and leave the middle of the crop to the peasant. And he communicated it to him.

The peasant agreed unhesitatingly. The devil was sure to trip him up. But the peasant had his own plans. This time he sowed maize. The crop was rich and luscious. The stalks grew tall and full of white milky cobs. In time the grains of maize became brown and strong on the cobs. The devil came and got his due, the roots and the lofty crowns; and the peasant bundled together all the stalks in between with the rich cobs growing on them.

The devil soon realized that even the third time he had been defeated. "He is more than a match for me," he came to the conclusion. He called the peasant.

"What is your highness's pleasure?" submitted the latter courteously.

"Pleasure, indeed!" the devil replied. "It is too much for me," he added, "the land and its problems. From this time forth I have absolutely no claim upon your farm and you can do with it what you like."

"Your highness, I am much grateful to you!"

[1] There is a French variant in which the peasant sowed pole-beans on the third occasion. Afterwards they hold a contest in wit, the last one of its kind, in which, of course, the devil is defeated.

Just a Nickname

WHEN all is said and done a nickname is a name, a concrete appellation standing like an unshakable rock in an angry ocean which demolishes and engulfs reputations. Think of such names as William Rufus or Single Speech Hamilton! The nickname enables us not only to pin-point the particular man from among the billions of the dead but also unrolls for our perusal the whole record of his character. What a great boon it, therefore, is for the unknowing!

Nicknames have had a glorious career in Kashmir. They were invented and applied owing to an inherent necessity of spotting out men and women, or families. With the exception of a few cases what are family names today were but nicknames once. These nicknames have gradually come into their own and attained respectability quite at par with the original family surnames. Surnames like Trambhu (meaning pock marked), Braru (a cat), Dand (a bull), Tak (an earthenware plate), Aima (unbaked), Kotru (pigeon), Kantru (a male sparrow), Khar (an ass), are proudly professed by hundreds of families today. The list could be multiplied a thousand fold. Human deformities like Loung (lame), Shanglu (with six fingers), Kana (with a deformed ear) give rise to many family names today, while other bodily characteristics are responsible for many more like Mota (corpulent one), Nika (a slender one) Chhot (a pygmy), Dandan (one with teeth dropped), Khosa (a beardless one), Khor (one with scabies).... These families are regarded to be as proud and good as any, and yet nicknames have made many a person miserable.

There was once a peasant in a Kashmir village. He had not much of land and was obliged to spend several months of the year in the city as a domestic servant in one family or another. It was by no means a pleasant experience for him to be at the mercy of his employer and his numerous encumbrances including an aunt, two wives and an indistinguishable brood of children. Getting up early in the morning he, to use his own words, would "get into the harness like the pony dragging a cart." Sweeping the house, several speedy trips to the market, the usual drudgery in the scullery, tending the children, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, making beds, and quite a good deal more was his usual routine. And all the time he had had no tidings from his wife and children throughout the long winter months.

Is it surprising that he complained of his unenviable lot to many? Among these latter was a shopkeeper from whom this peasant-cum-domestic servant would make purchases for the household of his master. He seemed to be a sympathetic man and offered the other the tube of his hubble bubble at which he would give a few pulls with his ample lungs. "Will you take my advice if I place an inexpensive plan before you of supplementing your meagre income?" said the shopkeeper once. The other jumped at the idea as he was in need of nothing else more earnestly than the means to get rid of the drudgery of domestic service. "All that you need do," said the shopkeeper, "is to buy a hen. She can be fed with a few crumbs and will lay eggs. I undertake to make the sale of your eggs for a nominal commission."

The idea of raising poultry was nothing novel for the peasant but he always found it difficult to negotiate a price for the produce. The village shopkeeper got eggs almost for nothing from unsophisticated peasants. Therefore, though rearing of poultry did not cost anything, it meant a lot of bother for little gain, and hence the hesitation in the mind of the peasant to undertake it.

As the shopkeeper promised the peasant to arrange the sale of the produce, the biggest stile in the way of this new undertaking was overcome. Though he had no ready cash he managed to borrow some money to purchase a hen. In due course of time the hen laid eggs and brought a little sum to the peasant. The peasant invested the proceeds in the same business and added to his stock of poultry. His business expanded steadily till by the next fall of winter the peasant felt that he could manage to live without having to go to the city in search of service. It was such a blessing to be spared the drudgery of a domestic servant and the shame of it. The peasant was grateful to his stock of poultry and particularly the first hen with which he made a start.

The first hen happened to be whitish in colour. It was not bright dazzling white but rather the faint pale white left after the other colours had been washed out. The peasant regarded this hen as the harbinger of good fortune to him and wherever he went or whomever he talked to, he had something to say about his white hen, — how it started crowing early in the morning, how it would sometimes strut or cut a graceful caper.... Never did he miss an occasion to say something about the white hen. In course of time the white hen became the talk of the village and the surrounding ones too.

The next stage was to identify the peasant as the owner of the white hen: "M——— has been responsible for such and such an act."

"Which M———?"

"The one who owns the white hen."

Not long after, however, they omitted to mention the ownership entirely and called him by this very name, the "white hen." This name spread like wild fire in the manner of all nicknames which are always catching. Urchins in the streets and old men near the bank of the stream began to call him by this very name, and this was very irritating. Every time he heard the urchins shouting

"white hen" he felt provoked and angry. He was easily put out and wished to crush them to a jelly and retorted with abuse and vituperation. This tickled the urchins and encouraged them to further fire works. Even the grown-ups felt a peculiar pleasure in provoking him.

His susceptibility to excitement on account of the nickname increased tenfold. If he saw two men talking together he suspected that they were plotting to shout "the white hen" behind his back. If he saw people smiling he ran to the conclusion that they were doing so at his expense. This gave people opportunities more and more to fling the nickname at him either in his face or behind his back.

This excitement affected his nerves. "They are bent upon driving me mad," he would blurt out now and then.

"Look here," a good friend would tell him, "you are a grown-up man, you should exercise self-restraint and not get upset like a girl of sixteen."

"Self-restraint! Do you talk of self-restraint? Who can exercise it to a greater degree than I do? But how long can I exercise self-restraint when they are bent upon downright abuse? Didn't your hear them shouting 'the white hen'? Rascals. I'll make an example of them," and down he would rush with a stone in his hand against an imaginary foe raising the provocative slogan.

A simple matter took thus a grave and tragic turn. Several times in the day he would imagine people shouting the nickname and out of his house he rushed, set upon "teaching the rogues a lesson." Physicians and sane men came to only one conclusion and that was that a change in the environment alone could save him. He was advised to go out of the village again for some time.

He could have gone to the city to his former employer. But he preferred to go to the plains beyond the mountain walls encircling the valley. He joined one of the gangs of peasants who go out to the plains in the winter to

supplement their earning on their lands. He earned a pretty little sum everyday which pleased his heart. But, above all, he was happy because no one in the plains knew the nickname which had almost driven him mad. Those terrible moods of excitement, moments of temporary insanity or depression became a matter of the past and he came almost to believe that life was not so bad.

Several winters passed. In the plains the idea of his former nickname had practically disappeared from his mind, what with the change in the environment and the savings from his wages which had accumulated. The thought of returning home began to stir his heart. This craving became stronger every day till he could no longer resist it. He decided to visit home.

The return journey was quicker and easier, for he could afford to come in a bus. Money was jingling in his pockets. He came to the road crossing whence his village was but a couple of miles distant. He saw several men going to the surrounding villages and they fell a talking.

"Hello! I seem to have seen you and known you but can't place you," said one.

"Indeed so do I. But methinks I saw him several years back," joined another.

"Sure enough, for I am coming from the plains after several years."

"I used to know a fellow who couldn't stand a nickname and left the village. Your face very much reminds me of him. .... Are you by any means the same fellow whom they nicknamed 'the white hen'? He has been missing for many a year now."

"Lord! they are starting it with a vengeance," he thought. "Good friends," he told them, "yes, I am the man who could not stand the nickname 'the white hen' and slipped out to the plains. The craving for my home brought me back. You have restarted the game right now when I have not even stepped into my village. I

will go back to the plains and I wish you joy of your homes. Such a place is not for me."

He retraced his steps right then and came back to the plains. And the nickname "the white hen" languished and died.

The Son-in-Law

QADIRA lived in the house of the great Sheikh as did his father. The latter was first employed in the household as a groom. His wife died in the village to which the family belonged and the stable-man brought the little boy to live in the house of the nobleman. Here he assisted his father in the stable and sometimes was entrusted with errands by the ladies of the household. His chief claim to his board and lodge with the illustrious family was his companionship with the young Sheikh, the nobleman's son. The latter was practically of the same age and grew so fond of the urchin that he would never brook separation from him except when the former was engaged in assisting his father in cleaning the stables or grooming the ponies.

Though Qadira had to remove horse-dung from the stable or to attend to other unpleasant duties he kept himself unusually clean. His father persuaded him to wash his clothes frequently. In winter when it was cold he went to the bath and made free use of the warm water in the boiler after other members of the household went to bed. Those who did not know him could hardly suspect that he was a stable-boy. Those who saw him frequently always quoted the Kashmiri adage that one should wash one's hands clean before touching him.

Well, Qadira was a groom and errand-boy in the house of the Sheikh and a companion of the nobleman's son. It was never intended, that Qadira should receive any bookish education. But being exposed to it in the company of the young Sheikh he could not help remembering the same lessons and picking up literacy. His blue-

blooded companion was a boy of varied interests as befitted the scion of the great house; he could, therefore, pay only scant attention to his studies. Qadira's mind, on the other hand, seemed to be so constituted that letters, sentences and whole lessons found a fertile soil there. If the money spent over the young master of the house did not yield result commensurate with its magnitude, it at least made up through the education of the rustic urchin.

Qadira grew into a shrewd lad. He could strike a good bargain and gained advantage by his boldness and dash where faint-hearted men older in age failed. Before very long he was promoted to assist the bailiff and keep accounts. This was a signal advance in his position which delighted his father but filled other domestics with pangs of jealousy. He discharged his duties admirably and his master was pleased with him mighty well. He never made any secret of his appreciation of Qadira's ability.

One day Qadira's father saw his master in a jovial mood and was assiduous in keeping his exalted spirits aloft. When he perceived that the moment was opportune, he said, "Sire, may I make a humble request?"

"Do so, for I am much indebted to you and your son for your faithful service. What do you want?"

"Father," said the servant, "I have grown grey eating your salt. It is my great good fortune. My son has bloomed into a young man eating your bread. While it is my ambition to lay down my life in your service, I request you to seek a job in the administration for your slave, my son. I do not quite relish his being here."

He told his master how other servants in his household felt jealous of father and son, and cursed them behind their backs. "I can stand anything except a curse against my only son." His words moved the heart of the Sheikh, who himself had only one son. In his own heart he had an additional motive and that was to gain respectability in the eyes of society. Before long the Sheikh, a

big feudal lord got Ghulam Qadir, the son of his trusted servant appointed as a clerk in the office of the district collector who was only too pleased to embrace a chance to oblige a big landlord like the influential Sheikh.

Ghulam Qadir was an intelligent clerk and came to have a reputation for efficient work. He disposed of the work allotted to him in no time every day and was also able to assist other clerks in the disposal of their cases. Consequently he got to know the work in all sections of the office which gave him a sort of a key-position. Other clerks sought his advice when baffled with difficulties. Intricate cases could not be attended to without his consultation and apparently insurmountable difficulties were smoothed out by him in no time. The district collector was pleased with him and appointed him as his own *munshi* or confidential clerk.

Munshi Ghulam Qadir, or Munshi Ji as he came to be called now, had learnt another precious lesson by instinct and that was that "more things are wrought by establishing proper public relations than this world dreams of." Accordingly he went to the residence of the collector now and then with a case of choice luscious apples, fine walnuts or a *khirwar* of *mushkbudji* rice. The collector would not accept such a present from his humble clerk, but he had no hesitation when he heard that it came from the great Sheikh. There was, therefore, little doubt that the Munshi would race along the roads to prosperity along which others were panting on leaden feet or merely limping. In a year or so the Munshi found himself transferred to the executive line as a *girdawar* with a score of *patwaris* under him.

Ghulam Qadir now found it necessary to come to the notice of the *hakim-e-ala* or the provincial governor and he sought the good offices of his erstwhile master, the Sheikh. Not long after, the governor went on a tour of the part of the country where the Sheikh had his estate. It was in his own interest for the latter to entertain the

governor. At a dinner held in honour of the governor the Sheikh commended his protege to the kind attention of his august guest. Munshi Ji was in need of just this introduction. He won his place nearer and nearer to the heart of the governor by the efficient discharge of his duties. The governor also received occasional presents from the Sheikh and he was intelligent enough to understand that the latter would feel obliged if he pushed up Ghulam Qadir. In a couple of years, therefore, he got him appointed as a *naib-tehsildar*.

The old groom in the house of the Sheikh was beside himself with joy and urged his son to take steps to settle himself in married life. Ghulam Qadir, however, was not satisfied yet and considered such a development premature. He had a higher ambition and marriage, he felt, would hinder rather than help its realization. He picked up the ins and outs of his new job till he felt confident that he could hold his own against even the veterans amongst his subordinates. He prepared to win the good graces of the *mashir-i-mal*, the supreme head of the revenue administration of the State. This time he did not trouble the Sheikh himself but played his cards so well that the governor offered his good offices to introduce him to the *mashir-i-mal* as a relative of the great Sheikh. This done, the *mashir-i-mal* found the young man very useful. If eminent people came from outside the State as guests of the administrator, Ghulam Qadir saw to it that they were comfortably lodged and looked after; if there was a wedding or a festival in his house, Ghulam Qadir lost no time in making arrangements for the purchase of commodities of the finest quality. Besides, the Sheikh was eminent enough to include the administrator in the circle of his friends and suitable gifts were gratefully accepted by him from the former. It was, of course, Ghulam Qadir through whom such gifts were received and the latter's name had therefore grown familiar to the *mashir-i-mal*.

The Sheikh once called on the *mashir-i-mal* and

Ghulam Qadir too figured in the conversation. "I have not been able to do anything for your kinsman," said the minister. The Sheikh spoke courteously meaning that it was never too late to begin. A couple of days later when Ghulam Qadir saw the *mashir-i-mal* in the course of his official duty the former put him the question: "How are you related to the Sheikh?" After a slight demur he replied "I am his son-in-law, sir."

"Oh really!" observed the minister. "I am very sorry. I have not been able to do anything for you. Please convey my apologies to your father-in-law. I shall try my utmost to find a way to help you."

In a week or so Ghulam Qadir became a *tehsildar*. The minister sent a message to the Sheikh expressing the hope that he would feel somewhat satisfied at the promotion of his relation, adding that he had learnt of their intimacy only a few days earlier.

When Ghulam Qadir met the Sheikh next he asked him how he had described his relationship with himself. Ghulam Qadir was silent. The Sheikh reiterated his question but the other was still hesitant. "You had better kill me sir," replied Ghulam Qadir. But the Sheikh was eager and promised to forgive him. It was then that Ghulam Qadir revealed the truth.

"Son . . . in . . . law!" His face turned red in anger. But that was not for long, for he added, "You have reached your present position through hard work and intelligence while my own son has come to no good. I really could not get a better son-in-law. You are my son-in-law indeed," and he determined to entrust his daughter to him.

Thus did the groom's son marry the daughter of his master. It was a proud day for the groom and prouder still for the Sheikh.

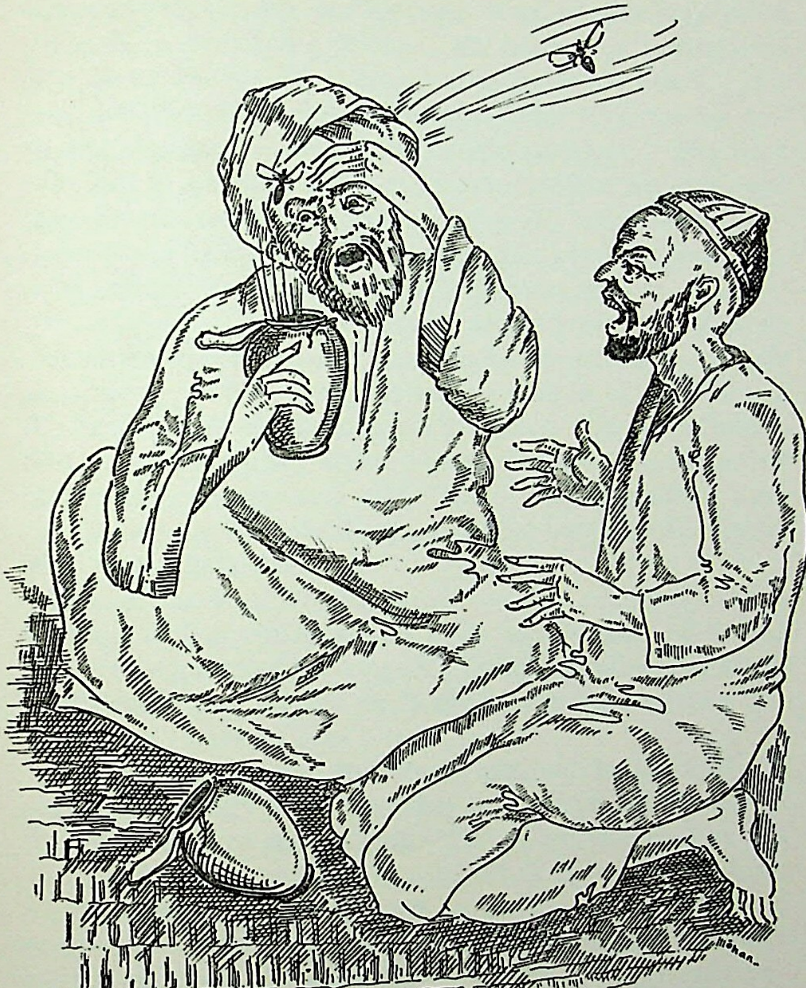
Eh ! Oh !

AWAY from the ocean the sailor is never in his element. He falls a prey to the sharp practices of swindlers and city sharks; he becomes the laughing stock of the townsmen. Likewise is the peasant when he is off his land. Clever people exploit his simplicity, his ingenuousness and his capacity to work. He may be made the butt of many a jest, or the victim of a practical joke, and he bears his cross on his ample shoulders patiently.

Owing to the rigour of the climate in Kashmir, the peasant has to pass through a period of unemployment for nearly five months in a year. The well-to-do farmers can afford to enjoy this enforced rest, consuming cooked rice, lentils, turnips and pickled knol-kohl to their hearts' content. Those who are not so well-off supplement their slender incomes by working on cottage looms and turning out woollen blankets. Others, standing at the lowest rung of the ladder, hire themselves out as domestic servants in the larger towns, or the metropolis of Srinagar. Aziz Buth belonged to this last class.

Many, many years ago when the corn was abundant to the extent of superfluity, Aziz Buth could not stretch his harvest so far as to cover the needs of the family all the year round. He was the father of two children, and in spite of the labours of the whole family — even the elder child would sometimes contribute his mite — he ran into debt. He was, therefore, compelled to drift towards the city in search of temporary employment as a domestic servant.

Untutored in the ways of the world as he was, he did not think it would be easy for him to find some employ-



Eh! Oh!

ment in the city. He spent the first night in a mosque wrapped in a blanket, for he knew of no secular habitation where he could obtain shelter. He feasted on a couple of dry loaves and sincere prayers rose from his heart. The next morning had a pleasant surprise for him, for he met an acquaintance — a rare experience for him. The man belonged to a village in the neighbourhood of his own, and they knew each other moderately well. Aziz Buth considered his night well-spent when his acquaintance promised to get him the sort of employment he was after.

The acquaintance was as good as his word. Aziz Buth was taken to the house of a man who appeared to be very prosperous. There were already a couple of servants in the house and Aziz Buth made the third. Khwaja Saheb, that is how the head of the house was designated, called him to his presence and said, "Many people proudly seek my service for the consideration of free board and lodging. Will that satisfy you?"

Aziz Buth was so overawed by the manner of the Khwaja in his costly shawl and turban that he found words missing from his tongue. With difficulty he seemed to stammer out: "Noble sir, I am a poor man having left little ones in the village."

Khwaja Saheb was thereupon pleased to fix half-an-ass load of paddy as his monthly wages besides the privilege of free board and lodging. "But, mind you, if ever one of my servants is not able to complete a task given to him, he is subjected to a fine," said he, half in jest and half in seriousness. Aziz Buth's companion only laughed "ha! ha" by way of taking the sting out of these words and he himself grinned bashfully.

The winter was on and Aziz Buth gave his best to the employer. Late at night before he went to his bed Aziza had the privilege of being admitted to the bed chamber of his employer. He was asked to massage the legs of the Khwaja with his strong muscular hands, for he found sleep evading him until he was subjected to this process. Early

in the morning, sometimes even before the cock crew, the Khwaja would shout "Aziza" and the latter was expected to be ready with the hubble-bubble, refilled with fresh water from the river, with tobacco and live coal to enable his employer to fumigate his interior to his fill. He was the favourite of the harem in so far as he would be entrusted with all tasks requiring personal attention. His colleagues — the fellow servants in the house — encouraged him in this belief, for otherwise such tasks would fall to their own lot. This encouragement lightened their own tasks, for Aziza could easily be got into the right frame of mind so as to volunteer to undertake what all shirked.

The winter turned out to be extra severe. Householders, who could afford to do so, avoided leaving their homes as far as possible. But domestics like Aziza had no choice in matters like these. In fact the comforts available in the home of the Khwaja Saheb depended a great deal upon the exertions of men like Aziza, and the latter was modestly proud of the part he played in this respect.

At the end of a period of about four months Aziza thought of going home. He had not seen his family all the while and soon his farm would claim his attention. He made a request to the great Khwaja, the first of its kind. The latter did not seem to relish it, and with a face beaming with a mischievous smile he said, "Aziza ! I shall certainly pay all your dues. But before I do so, go to the market and get me two things, *wy* (eh !) and *wai* (oh !). Your wages will be paid to you only when you get the things." "Eh and Oh!" ejaculated Aziza in utter amazement, for he had never heard of such things. However, he had not the face to articulate his suspicions lest it be only his ignorance. So he set out.

Long he roamed and far, but never did any shopkeeper seem to deal in these substances. Some laughed outright, others pricked their ears while some came to regard him light in the head. "Should I fail in this last task?" cried he. "All these months I worked to the utter satisfaction

of everybody, and now this last straw seems to be too much for me. And the big man will probably eat up my wages if I fail to satisfy him. . . ."

He was walking abstractedly, with these thoughts pressing upon his mind. He went from shop to shop. At the seventh or the seventeenth shop he met with a different response to his inquiry. "And what do you require them for, my good man?" asked the shopkeeper, an oldish man with a rich stubble on his face. Aziza told his tale.

"And if you fail to place them before him you won't get your pay, your hard-earned dues, is that it?"

"Exactly; that is what the man threatens me with."

The old man soon found out that the Khwaja was trading upon the simplicity of the peasant. He was himself something of a sport and he thought of playing the game for the fun of it.

"I can give it to you provided you hand it over directly to the Khwaja himself without showing it to any one else. Do you agree?"

Aziza agreed.

"It is meant for Khwaja Saheb. Do not spoil it by examining it yourself or fingering it," the shopkeeper insisted.

"Not at all, sir; and God bless you for coming to my rescue. I went over from shop to shop but nobody seems to stock it," said Aziza with a feeling of relief.

"Such precious things are not found with every grocer. Even I keep it in a godown. You will wait here for me."

He returned after half-an-hour and gave Aziza a package covered in an old newspaper bound with a dried weed. He got eight annas for his pains and Aziza was glad that he could now keep his head high in the presence of all the other servants in that he had not failed in his errand.

The Khwaja expected Aziza to return and report failure and crave his mercy, for when God created this universe out of His bounty, he forgot to give a corporeal frame to "eh!" and "oh!". According to the verbal agreement

which, of course, was morally binding upon Aziza the latter's failure to work up to the satisfaction of the master would result in forfeiting his wages. The Khwaja was thus looking forward to a lot of fun: his verdict that Aziza was no longer entitled to his wages would bring Aziza prostrate before him, but that he would stick to his word till ultimately he would condescend to release part of the amount. . . .

The Khwaja was in a very rosy mood when Aziza appeared before him. The tube of the hubble-bubble passed from one mouth to another. Seeing Aziza he simulated an angry mood. "Where, in the name of God Almighty, have you been all this while," he shouted. "I sent you on a little errand and you seem to have been lazing at your grandmother's. How fat you have grown eating my cooked rice here!"

"Respected sir, I have been roaming from street to street in search of it and my legs are aching with the fatigue," replied Aziza.

"If your legs are so delicate, why did you take the trouble of coming over here for employment? Did you not get the thing?"

"Respected sir, I have got it," submitted Aziza.

The Khwaja relaxed as he now expected to fill the little assembly with theatrical laughter by declaring what Aziza had got as spurious. "What have you got? Let me see it," he said in an over-weening tone.

Aziza submitted the little package. The whole gathering was intrigued. The outer chord of dry weed was unfastened and the wrapping removed. Two small earthenware receptacles, no bigger than a medium sized ink pot, were discovered. Each had a wide mouth closed over with a piece of paper pasted with gum. Their inquisitiveness was piqued.

The paper covering of one of the vessels was broken through and the Khwaja peered into it. It appeared to be empty. While he was about to throw it away out came a

bee which buzzed along the hand of the Khwaja who could not help crying "eh!" So far so good.

The paper lid of the other vessel was broken through. But before the Khwaja could say anything, from its interior darted a wasp who perched directly on his brow and involuntarily a painful "oh!" escaped from his lips.

The assembly realized that Aziza had after all not failed to get the rare commodity!

The Inauspicious Bride

THERE was a village at the foot of the mountains. It comprised a few shanties built of rough-hewn logs of wood notched together to keep them in place. The structure of shanties at once told every stranger that a forest was very close and, in fact, it was so. A stream flowed at a short distance from this habitation. The stream was neither so turbulent as to deserve the somewhat awe-inspiring name of a mountain torrent, nor so tame as to suffer being used for navigation. When the new snows melted in early summer after a pommelling from incessant rain in April, the stream was usually in spate and hundreds of logs and wooden sleepers floated down to centres of value for marketing timber. During this season there was considerable activity up and down the rivulet of people concerned with the lumbering business. They were engaged in felling, clearing away and floating down any logs that got stranded, and sometimes made a little fortune by disposing of a log to needy buyers for practically no more than a song.

When, on the other hand, the stream flowed placid, it was made use of as a means of transport. There were no roads linking the village with the rest of the world except the beaten track along the bank of the stream. Other villages were quite far away and not easily accessible.

Considering all these circumstances the habitation deserved to be known as a tiny hamlet rather than by the more imposing name of a village, and yet the last-mentioned description suited it better. The people lived in a corporate organized manner. They had a house of

prayer built with voluntary effort: they could boast of a shrine dedicated to a local saint who answered prayers sincerely offered; there was a physician who also did honour to the office of shopkeeper who could sell you anything from medicinal herbs to snuff and dried fish; and there was a priest who described himself as a humble interpreter of religious law and the will of God.

The priest who actually lived in the next village down the river had many ecclesiastical and secular functions to perform. The dying could not give up the ghost safely till aided by him and the dead souls or spirits could with impunity come back to harass their survivors unless laid low by him. With his amulets and incantations he complemented and supplemented the efforts of the physician to heal the mortal bodies of the villagers. He also maintained some sort of a liaison with the petty officials in and around the village and was feared and respected on this account also. He was also the registrar and censor of marriages which were regarded valid and confirmed only after he gave his blessings. No one dared to hazard upon a matrimonial alliance without the prior approval of the local priest.

At the time to which this story pertains, the priest was a handsome young man in his early forties. He had succeeded to his office on the demise of his father. Not only had he maintained the privileges of his office without suffering any curtailment but had in fact extended them with vigour, sometimes outpacing the dignity usually associated with his status. He loved a good meal and good dress. He was fond of cheerful company, humorous anecdote and sharp repartee. He could exact respect and obedience if not voluntarily forthcoming, and was most jealous of his prestige.

Not long after he assumed the responsibilities of his office, a young man had the temerity to commit an act directly antagonizing the priest. This young man's business frequently carried him to neighbouring villages. By

profession he was an itinerant pedlar and was responsible for creating a market in these remote areas for such modern novelties as hair oil, looking glasses, glass bangles, cheap trinkets and toys. His business attracted first the children and ultimately their mothers. Fragrance, even though spurious, is one of the handmaids of Cupid. Is it not often unavoidable for a vendor to fit a glass bangle on the arms of his fair customer? In short, the pedlar fell in love with a maid. He won the approval of her parents who considered him gentle and enterprising as people in remote villages may be. The maid was willing enough to link her life with that of the young man and so were the respective parents. One day the young pedlar returned to his village with a bride.

It is glorious for any young man to be wedded to the maid he loves. In the case of the young pedlar it was heavenly bliss, for his bride was most beautiful by standards old and new. Every one admired her beauty and most young men envied the lot of the young pedlar. Tall and slim, and bright as the moon she was, and who could describe her almond-shaped eyes, or her fine nose? Whoever saw this rustic beauty admired her. Everyone was therefore happy.

But the pedlar and his parents had committed one serious blunder. Having a bright prospect for happiness they forgot to get the approval of the village priest. The marriage formalities were actually gone through in the village where the bride's parents lived, and this was outside the jurisdiction of the priest. There was little pomp and blare accompanying the ceremony and in fact, the pedlar's father did not take the trouble to invite many guests to accompany the groom all the distance to the bride's village. But when the bride came home he thought of making amends for his omission. He invited the priest to his home to grace the wedding feast with his presence and to bless the bride and bridegroom.

The news of the wedding had reached the priest even

before the pedlar's father set out from his home. The priest read in it a challenge to his authority which he and his ancestors had exercised for generations. "This might well constitute a precedent for other misguided people to undermine my prestige and to flout my authority" he thought. "A thief can rob my house but once and at night, but if they continue to transgress thus, nobody can check this mid-day robbery. I must act and act at once," he said to his wife.

"And what will the people think of us? Our prestige and our authority will vanish; I shall be dragged down to the level of common rustic women who follow in the wake of herds of cattle and gather cowdung," rejoined his wife.

This provoked the priest still further and he made his plan.

When the groom's father reached his house, he was already prepared for his reception. In response to the invitation the priest made no complaint. He made, in passing, an ironical reference to his exclusion. The invitation was accepted with apparent cordiality and the two started for the house where the festivities were going on.

Neither the bridegroom nor anyone else had the shade of a doubt that the priest would readily give his approval to the bride and thus confirm the marriage in the eyes of the village community. On his arrival the priest was accorded a welcome but it lacked the usual ardour and he at once felt that he did not have the same respect that day as he otherwise had. Anyway, he was the chief guest at the feast and he said the grace.

In due course, the bride was brought to the presence of the holy father and the others withdrew in accordance with the time-honoured village custom. She sat before him with downcast eyes. He had a fair and full view of her face, her long eyelashes, her ruby lips and the dimple on her cheek with the complexion of peach flowers, and

a man with a little experience could read from his face complex emotions passing through his mind. In a moment, however, he stiffened his expression and asked them to lead the bride out of the room. She did not receive the usual benediction from the holy father.

The bridegroom and the father waited for his comments. But he simply said, "I cannot congratulate you on this wedding. The bride is most inauspicious for this family. I am not able to invoke God to bless her."

This announcement came like a thunderbolt to the bridegroom. The earth seemed to fall from under his feet. His father too felt much alarmed. He rued his negligence in not having sought the prior approval of the priest. But what had happened could not be undone and it was best to find a means to "domesticate" the bride and to ward off all evil influence. He submitted the case apologetically to the priest.

The latter was nothing if not thorough, and quite bluntly said that nothing in his opinion could attenuate the malicious portents for the whole family as long as the bride stayed under the roof. "You must take immediate steps to resolve this tangle," said he, "otherwise great evil is going to befall this family of honest and God-fearing people." The old man thought it possible still that the priest could devise a talisman or an amulet to afford protection to the family against any evil influence. He humbly submitted his viewpoint for the consideration of the priest. The latter was positive. "Look here, good man! I have all along looked upon my parish as my friends and well-wishers, and I shall be the veriest villain if I am anything else towards them. I have studied her physiognomy and considered it in the light of what little knowledge of the stars I have. The presence of the bride in your house is inauspicious for your wife and yourself, and much more so for your son, the worthy groom who should have been considered the most fortunate young man but for this."

The mother-in-law who was growing fonder and fonder of the bride every minute would perhaps not mind a little sacrifice in her advanced age if it made her son happy. The old man loved life well enough but thought that he had anyhow to make his exit from the stage, and would not be unwilling to risk putting the knowledge of the priest to test. But both of them were stunned when the priest listed their son as the main target of the malicious stars. Neither of them was prepared to take any chances where it concerned the bridegroom. Inevitably they were forced to concur in his opinion that the baneful influences working against their son must be neutralized at whatever cost.

The poor groom was wringing his hands. It was so hard for him. But his mother quoted convincing instances of people who suffered for not having followed the instructions of the priest. "My dear son, I would readily give my life for your happiness only if it could ward off the evil influence," his mother said pitifully with much feeling.

In short, the unfortunate young man had to resign himself to the demand made upon him in the interest of his parents and of his own. But the problem was how to get rid of the bride. They consulted the priest. "It is your affair to get rid of this enchantress," he said with apparent unconcern. But the family felt much concerned and nobody could make any suggestion worth the while. After everybody seemed to be on the verge of defeat and the whole plan was in danger of being wrecked on this account, the priest said, "I can think of one simple solution. Shut her up in a wooden box and let it float on the surface of the river at dead of night. Let her meet her own fate thus."

The plan was agreed upon and the priest took his leave after getting his dues. That night they gagged her mouth, put her in a wooden box and floated it on the river. "It is done and there is an end of the whole

affair," said the old man. "Son," he continued, "self-willed children are bound to suffer in the way you have. But don't worry, before the month is out you will have really a good bride wedded to you." The latter only shed tears silently to give vent to his grief.

The poor victim of this melodrama found a most unenviable nuptial chamber for her first night. At first she thought they would kill or smother her. But obviously she escaped that fate. Her mouth was shut but her eyes and ears were open. She floated down the river quietly, helplessly and expected to meet death, cold and hungry. She felt dizzy for a while but a heaving or a whirling motion would prick her back to consciousness. After some time, how long she did not know, she heard the hooting of an owl and then the current threw the box towards the land and it ceased to float. How this was going to affect her life she did not know. "It might prolong my life and miseries, or throw me into the hands of robbers. People gentle by appearance have used me thus. What can I expect of professed villains and cut-throats?" she thought. She again became unconscious.

When she came to herself she heard some voices outside:

"What is this box for? Perhaps kept there by some punter," said one voice.

"Whatever it be, let us examine it; may be it contains some treasure," rejoined another.

By this time the total darkness of the night was dispelled and a thin arc of the moon struggled up the sky, where myriads of stars were keeping watch over human actions, blurred here and there by light masses of clouds. A faint ray seemed to filter through a crevice in the lid into the box and the bride felt that the world was not totally dark. With that the two men having waded a few yards tried to lift the box which was neither very heavy nor quite light. They brought it to the river bank and raising the lid they were surprised to see a female form, gagged and bound. "What crime has this frail

woman committed?" said one somewhat perplexed. "She has committed no crime but is surely the victim of one," retorted the other while they cut the rope that bound her tightly and pulled out the cloth that filled her mouth almost to the throat. They found her pretty and delicate.

"Have no fears from us. What hard stroke of fate is it that has brought you to this end?" said the first.

"We are willing to help you if any human being is so barbarous as to treat you thus," added the other.

At first she was dumb and mute. These reassuring words released somewhere in her mind a fountain and she burst into profuse tears. When she stopped she narrated her tale of woe that brought her to the desolate spot instead of the nuptial chamber. The two were touched deeply. They belonged to the village next to that where she lived and knew her father. They even knew her pedlar husband who, they said, was gentle and affectionate. She heaved a long drawn out sigh. They attributed the whole mischief to the priest who they said, looked harmless but was really callous. They said he was a downright villain.

The two men earned their living with the help of a bear. They had along with them a bear tamed in the usual way. The bear was required to display his tricks every now and then for a few coppers or corn. In particular the bear was much taxed after the harvesting season. The two men felt there was some promise in their trade and that their income would double if they had two such brutes, one for each. They had come to this place, on the outskirts of a forest in search of the cub of a bear who was reported to have his lair somewhere in the vicinity. The tamed bear was to act as a sort of "go-between" or bait.

Having heard the pitiful story they decided to teach the priest a lesson. They knew that he lived in a village on the river bank a couple of miles below and by some sort of intuition expected him to be waiting for this boxed

beauty. "The rascally priest is highly lascivious and if you don't find him waiting for the box, shave off my moustache," said one with an assurance which the other was in no need of as he also knew the priest well enough.

They hatched the plan and implemented it swiftly. They put the bear into the box, put the lid on and closed it as had been done in entombing the bride. The box was then floated again.

At the other end the priest was indeed waiting hungrily. When he saw the bride he coveted her for his own harem. His advice that the bride should be left to drift on the stream in a box had, therefore, a double motivation: to deter people from such weddings in future and secondly to get her for himself. He, therefore, kept a vigil on the river bank along with a couple of trusted confidants. He had even thrown a hint to his household that he had been commanded to take another wife to fulfil some higher purpose for which God had created him.

He felt somewhat anxious when the box did not come to him in time and he began to think what steps he might take if his first plan really failed to materialize. While he was brooding thus he felt a thrill of delight to see the box. "There is my little bride," he said. "May I enjoy the bliss of her company!" He alerted his men, the box was stopped, pulled ashore and lifted. They carried it quietly to the house of the priest and deposited it in his room.

It was still night. The moon hid her face behind a gigantic screen of clouds. With a feeling, perhaps, that it is never too late the priest dismissed the men, lit a lamp and bolted the door. And then with something like a feeling of gratitude to his creator who had let him see this blissful hour he approached the box, undid the chain and raised the lid, ready to take to his bosom the fair inmate. Out sprang the bear with its hideous feature and took the initiative in wooing the priest. The priest had no time to think. The bear played havoc with him. No

doubt, it was a tamed bear, but they say that "if a monkey falls from a height of eighty yards, he is still a monkey by breed." The priest shrieked and cried for help. The bear, on the other hand, had a little free play after years of bondage, and all his suppressed instinct of vengeance upon human kind was having its expression at the moment. He no doubt derived immense enjoyment from his dalliance with the priest which lasted quite a long time till the neighbourhood was alerted and a host of people came along rubbing their eyes to help the priest in fighting the "devil in the guise of a bear" who had come on a visitation in this form to have his revenge for winning people to the ways of God !

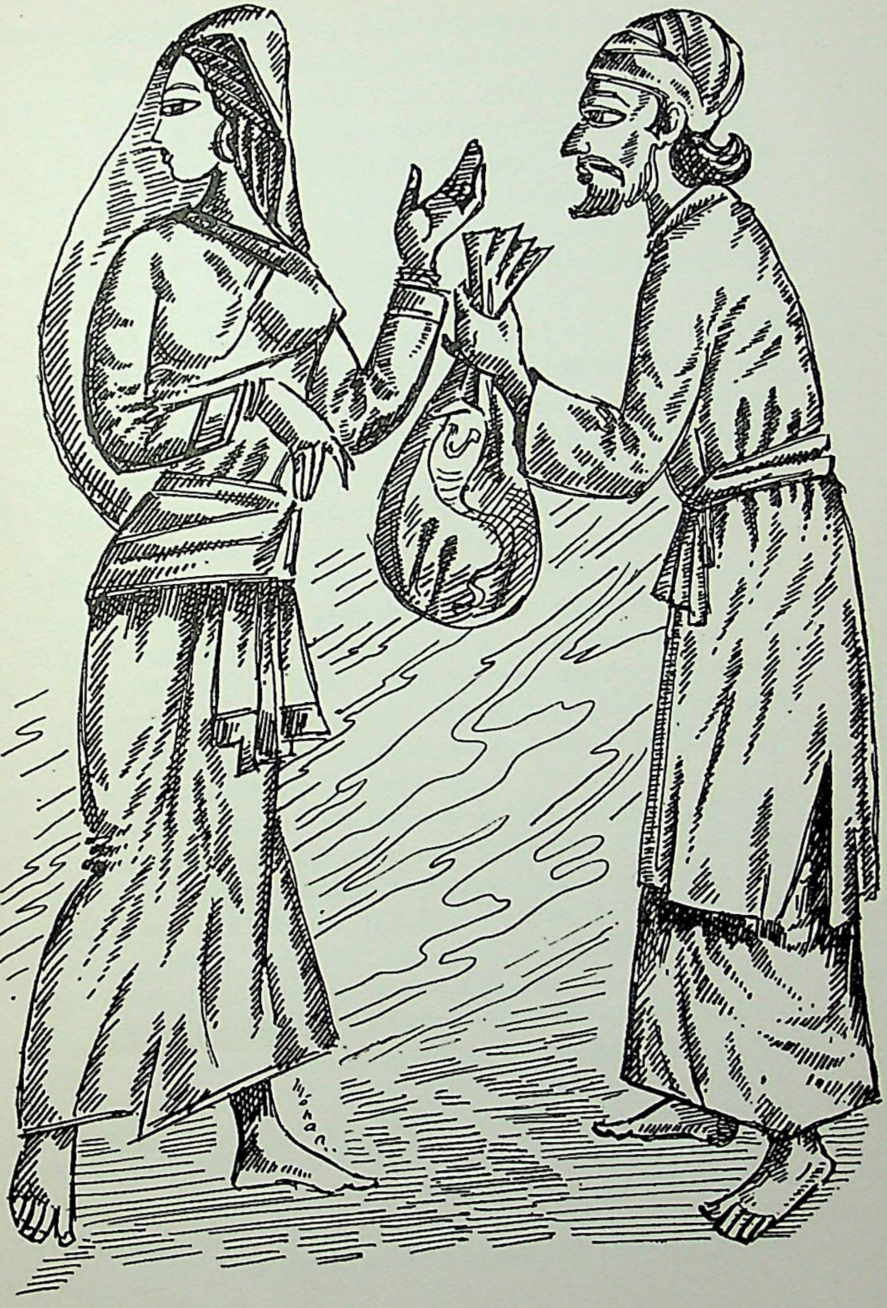
Not long after, the bear reached back to his masters who restored the "inauspicious" bride to her parents and then to her husband. They would tell the tale as far as they knew it and gave the cue to the bear to pantomime his part which he did with some vigour. Wherever the bear went after harvesting, people asked them to enact this piece and amply rewarded a good piece of acting.

Himal and Nagrai

LONG long ago there lived a poor Brahman in Kashmir named Soda Ram. Fortune had yoked him to a wife who was ambitious and discontented. She always grumbled for lack of the many requirements of material prosperity and called her husband a foolish drone. She had a terrible tongue which was used to a devastating effect against her husband and became sharper and progressively vitriolic in that exercise. Soda Ram was sick of her and would very much have liked to get rid of her but found no way out. One day when his wife asked him to go to a not distant place to receive alms from a king, he jumped at the proposal, as that would give him a welcome respite for a few days.

He left his home carrying a little food in a small wallet. Travelling some distance in the hot sun he felt tired. Luckily he came to a shady grove of trees near a spring. He put down his small bundle, took his rough meal and lay down for a little rest. Before Soda Ram resumed his journey he saw a serpent come out of the spring and enter the little wallet he carried. An idea flashed across his mind: he would carry the serpent home to sting his wife and thus get rid of her. With trembling hands he closed the mouth of the wallet with a string and returned home with a light heart.

"I have got a precious gift for you," Soda Ram shouted to his wife when he reached home. At first she would not believe it as her husband was the last man to do things that pleased her heart. However, having persuaded her that his bag held the gift, he gave it to her, stepped out of the room and closed the door from outside. When the



Himal and Nagrai

Brahman lady opened the bag the serpent popped its head out. She shrieked and ran to the door. But it did not open and Soda Ram said, "Let it sting you for aught I care!" The serpent apparently spared the woman and a miracle occurred. A brilliant radiance lit up the whole room and the serpent changed into a little male baby. Even Soda Ram was wonderstruck against his better knowledge. It was a piece of good fortune beyond the wildest dreams of his wife.

In course of time the baby grew into a boy, the beloved of his foster parents to whom he brought great prosperity. He came to be known as Nagrai, the king of serpents. One day he asked his father to take him to a spring of pure water where he wanted to take a bath. His father told him that there was only one such spring but that belonged to the princess and was surrounded by lofty walls. It was so heavily guarded, he told him, that not even a bird was permitted to take flight over it. But Nagrai's curiosity was fanned and he persuaded his father to take him to the outer wall. Reaching there the boy turned into a serpent, crept in through a crevice into the wall, satisfied his craving for a bath in the limpid spring and returned quietly unobserved.

The next day the illustrious Himal, the daughter of the king, observed that some one had taken a bath in the spring as she had heard the splashing of water. But neither the maids nor the guards had seen any one. Nagrai repeated his visit the next day undetected; but on the day after, Himal caught a glimpse of the intruder and was enthralled by his looks. She at once set a maid servant after him and came to know that he was the son of the Brahman Soda Ram. She was delighted to know that the young man who had won her heart belonged to the same city as she herself and made up her mind to marry no one except the Brahman boy. Discarding her modesty and the traditional good manners she approached her father in trepidation and broached the subject to him.

Her father did not mind her marrying the young man of her own choice but it was ridiculous and humiliating for him to have a poor Brahman for his son-in-law. "How can I show my face to the fellow princes of my caste, or to the courtiers and wazirs?" he reprimanded her. But she was dead set on it. She refused to touch her food or make her toilet till the king granted her her boon. In a few days, realizing the futility of his resistance her father sent for Soda Ram. The latter was already appalled when he stepped into the palace but was utterly perplexed when the king mentioned the subject of the alliance. "I am a poor Brahman, Sire," he said, "and how can I be worthy of such a peerless daughter-in-law." But even he found himself helpless as Nagrai compelled him to give his consent to the alliance which he did reluctantly.

As the wedding day approached Soda Ram was enveloped in gloom. "What a sorry figure shall we cut," he told everyone "when we lead the wedding party into the palace!" But Nagrai told him not to have any anxiety on this score. On the wedding day he gave him a piece of birchbark inscribed with a message and asked him to drop it in a spring. When Soda Ram returned home he felt dazed as he saw a gorgeous palace where he expected his poor hut. He felt convinced that he had lost his way. He also heard the beating of drums and the skirling of pipes inside, and saw caparisoned horses and elephants, guards with glittering uniforms and retainers. From inside came Nagrai befittingly dressed as a princely bridegroom and assured him that all was ready. The whole city was agog with music, feasting and revelry in honour of the wedding of Himal and Nagrai. A new palace was built for them on the river bank where they lived happily.

They were, however, not destined to enjoy their happiness for long. The serpent wives of Nagrai felt forlorn in his absence in the nether world and made efforts to trace

him out. One of them assumed the human form and made inquiries after her husband and learnt of his marriage with Himal. To remind him of his attachment to his serpent-wives she had carried with her a few rare golden vessels of his. Approaching the mansion of Himal she began to hawk her wares. Himal was attracted by her curios and purchased them at a throw-away price. When Nagrai returned she displayed to him the curios. He at once understood the mischief of his serpent-wives, broke the vessels to splinters and warned Himal not to succumb to the tempting talk of such women again. She was puzzled but kept quiet.

Another serpent wife tried a different trick when the first failed. Disguising herself as a cobbler-woman she approached Himal and asked her if she knew of her husband Nagrai the cobbler. "Nagrai is my husband," replied Himal, "but he is a Brahman, son of Soda Ram." "I don't know about that," said the other, "what I know is that Nagrai is my husband and is a cobbler by caste." She saw from Himal's face that her words were beginning to have effect. She added, "You may ask him his caste. But to make sure you may set him the trial. Ask him to plunge into a spring of milk. His body will sink if he be a Brahman. A cobbler's body will float on the surface."

When Nagrai came home Himal asked him to state his caste. He understood that she had been befooled by the serpent-wives and told her so but she insisted that he should undergo the trial to convince her of his caste. All his arguments failed to convince her that it was a trap laid down by her enemies. Ultimately he was induced to face the trial to allay her misgivings. He dipped his feet in a spring full of milk and was pulled down by his serpent-wives. He resisted their pull in the hope that Himal might be satisfied but to no avail. When his knees were immersed he said, "Himal, are you satisfied?" She was not. When his thighs were also immersed he repeated the question but she said nothing. He appealed to

Himal again and again when the surface of milk reached his navel, his chest and his chin but her misgivings about his caste were not cleared yet. She realized the gravity of the situation when he was immersed to his forehead. She sprang and tried to pull him out by the tuft of hair on his head. But it was too late. Nagrai disappeared under the milk and Himal was left only with a tuft of hair in her hand.

Himal was left forlorn. Her grief was beyond words and nothing could console her. She was in dismay and sorrow. The worst of it was that her own folly led to her undoing. To expiate her stupidity she decided to give all her wealth in charity. Everyday she relieved the distress of scores of men and women and gave away everything she had in silver, gold and jewels till only a golden mortar and pestle was left with her. Once an old man and his daughter came to her for alms. She served them food and he narrated to her a tale that filled her with excitement. He told her that one night he and his daughter lay under a tree near a spring. At midnight they heard a great noise as of an army on the march. Then came a number of servants out of the spring who cleaned the area and cooked a large feast which was served to many guests including a prince. They all disappeared within the spring except their chief. He left a little food under the tree saying "This is in the name of unlucky Himal" and disappeared within the spring.

Himal persuaded the old man to take her to the spring and rewarded him with the remnants of her wealth, the golden mortar and pestle. At night with her own eyes she saw the series of events narrated by the old man. Her nerves were tense and her heart was racing. When Nagrai came out of the spring she prostrated herself at his feet. Nagrai was overcome with emotion but he was afraid that his serpent wives would kill Himal if he took her to his abode. He consoled her and advised her to wait for a month or so till he could make some arrangement for her

stay. Himal would brook no further separation from him and coiled herself round his legs. Nagrai was in a pretty fix now. At last he turned her into a pebble, hid her in his turban and went back to his home in the serpent world. His wives began to look askance upon him and accused him of the smell of human flesh in his company. He could conceal the secret no longer and reconverted her into the human form after they had solemnly promised that they would not molest her. They were highly impressed with her beauty and tenderness and could not help being jealous. As they had solemnly promised Nagrai not to do her any harm they had their revenge by imposing all the culinary drudgery upon her. This princess brought up in a palace with maids and servants to carry out her every whim gladly undertook to look after the kitchen of the serpents. But she had no experience of these affairs and revealed herself to be a clumsy and uncouth cook. One day, while pouring boiled milk into basins to cool it for the serpent children, her ladle accidentally struck one of the vessels. The serpent children mistook it for the usual breakfast gong. They rushed to the kitchen and gulped the hot milk. As a result they died of burns. The serpent wives were overcome with grief. They stung Himal and she died immediately.

Nagrai was overwhelmed with grief but he was helpless. He washed the body of Himal and under pretence of cremating it carried it through the spring. He was so moved by his affection for Himal that he could not stand the idea of consigning it to the flames. Instead, he embalmed it and stretched it on a bed which he placed in a tree nearby. Now and then he would come out of the spring and remorsefully look on the beauty of the dead form. Not long after, a holy man happened to come to the spring and saw the dead body. He was so impressed by the beauty of Himal and the devotion of Nagrai that he gave the body the gift of life. He then carried Himal to his home where the holy man's son was fascinated with

her beauty and not knowing her story set his heart on marrying her.

A couple of days later Nagrai came once again out of the spring to draw consolation from a sight of Himal's body. He was grieved to find the body missing and sought to solve the mystery before retiring. He traced her ultimately to the holy man's hut where she was lying asleep and was delighted to find her living once again. He did not want to disturb her while asleep and, therefore, coiled himself near the bed of Himal till she would wake up. In the meantime, the holy man's son entered the cottage and was alarmed to see the snake. He at once killed the snake. Himal woke up in this commotion, realized the significance of the snake and bewailed its unnatural death. "Once again has he suffered for my sake" she mourned. She had the dead snake cremated and ascending the funeral pyre committed herself to the flames as *sati*. Everyone was moved by their devotion and the sacrifice they made for each other. The holy man was especially remorseful because it was in his hut where Nagrai out of love for Himal had lost his life and this had led to the self-immolation of Himal also. He felt deeply concerned. One day, while he was brooding over this question he heard two birds talking about the love, devotion and sacrifice of Himal and Nagrai. The female bird said to her consort, "Can they ever regain their human form?" "Verily so" replied the latter, "if their ashes are thrown into the spring." The holy man realized that the two birds were none else than Shiva and Parvati. He at once threw the ashes into the spring. Himal and Nagrai came to life in their human form once again and lived without further mishap ever after.

The Haunted Mosque

THE mosque in one of the villages had remained unattended to for quite a long time. The villagers were awakened to the urgency of repairing and building it and they made preparations accordingly. But the winter set in earlier and it was naturally decided to put off the operations till the dry season. Under the weight of snow part of the roof and one of the walls gave way and people abstained from offering prayers here on account of the hazard involved. They did not think it necessary to light the earthenware lamp in the evening and offered prayers at their respective homes.

Before they could start their repairs the holy month of Ramadhan came round. The villagers were devoutly religious with their simple faith and stout commonsense. It occurred to many of them now that they could not earn merit by keeping fasts without offering prayers in the mosque, and some of them decided not to keep away from the mosque, come what may.

Early in the month of Ramadhan there was great consternation in the village. The village mosque was pronounced to be haunted. On the very first day of the holy month one or two of them died and a couple of them went mad; and these were the very people who had gone there to offer prayers. "They have been devoured by a jinn who haunts the mosque" said the terror-stricken villagers amongst themselves. They went to the village headman who, of course, could not offer any ready-made solution to the problem. A conference of the inhabitants was called to find a solution.

Various aspects of the problem were discussed but no

solution was in sight. In the past the villagers had tackled many grave issues in such conferences. Once the village had been infested with robbers and the villagers sent them away tripping after a plan had been chalked out at a conference. On another occasion they rid the village and its neighbours of a severe menace of wild beasts that were threatening to destroy both man and his pet animals. But today the problem was entirely different. Mere physical strength was unavailing. What was needed was wisdom of a type as had never been put to test before.

When the conference was about to break up as infructuous a young man offered his services. "I shall endeavour my best to meet him on his own ground provided I have your blessings and cooperation," he said. Who was there amongst them who would not do everything to ensure his success in driving away the common enemy? They wished him god-speed.

The young man called for a wooden hammer, a piece of wood with nails running through it and a pot of *kanji*. Equipped thus he went into the mosque and found the jinn there. The young man was quite prepared for such an encounter. "How do you do, uncle," said he in an even, confident tone. The jinn saw that this was quite a different sort of man and had to be dealt with differently. "Take a seat, nephew, how do you do!" he replied. While the jinn was about to set him an apparently arduous task the young man said, "Good uncle, where is mine aunt? I trust she is well." The jinn was by no means so chivalrous and was slightly taken by surprise. However, before long he opened his offensive.

"Sweet nephew, will you do your old uncle a good turn?"

"By all means, dear uncle."

"Run your finger nails along my skin while I lie down and gradually stroke the bones on my back with your hand."



The Intruder

A jinn is nothing if not thick-hided and no human being could gratify the jinn's thirst for stroking him. He was known to have exhausted men first, urged them next to re-invigorate their efforts which is impossible for a tired man, accused the victim of having failed in the task set to him and finally punished him.

The young man had, however, already provided against that. The moment the jinn lay down on his side he started stroking him with his hammer. The jinn was really pleased because it was no mere fleshy first that was at work this time. He enjoyed it and forgot his evil purpose for the time being. The young man then picked the small board and began to rub the nails gently along the hide of the jinn. "Dear me! how delicious!" said the jinn enjoying the operation immensely. He was completely disarmed for the moment of his evil designs.

Having made sure of his ground the young man began to press the nail-board home. Scratches deeper and deeper were furrowed into the hide and the jinn began to complain as he felt the pain. "Oh! is it so?" said the young man, "let me wash your body." He rubbed *kanji* into the scratched skin of the jinn. The jinn was terribly stung all over and was in great agony. The young man now made deft use of his hammer and nail-board and the jinn ran away as fast as he could, shouting that the jinn had been out-jinned. The villagers felt a sigh of relief and the young man came to be commended everywhere. The *nambardar* declared that he would give him his daughter in marriage. Prayers were offered in the mosque and everyone felt satisfied.

But this feeling of complacency proved to be short-lived. The jinn in agony ran away and found asylum in a desolate forest amongst his fraternity. Seeing him treated thus the other jinns were much upset. "If they start treating us thus," said they, "how long will it be before we are extinct?" It did not require much argument to urge them to take concerted action against the village.

"And who amongst the villagers has treated you thus?" they asked the defeated jinn.

"I can recognize him," he replied.

"Not a trace of him will be left, nor of his relations, for seven generations. We shall strike hard and strike home."

They invaded the village like a swarm of apes, led by a one-eyed jinn.

There was panic in the village once again, with this difference that its magnitude was unprecedented. On the eve of this invasion of the army of jinns, everyone tried to disclaim his responsibility for the rash indiscretion of the young man. Some of them condemned the young man to escape injury from the jinns and even the *nambardar* said that he never expected to be landed in this mess. The young man was left almost alone to face the music.

But he never despaired of it. "I'll face them, come what may," he said and selected his weapons. He provided himself with a bag full of ashes and a small tabor and ascended a tall poplar tree. A jinn cannot ascend a tree and till they discovered a means of striking him aloft, he could watch their activities and be forewarned.

The invading army arrived in the village under the leadership of the one-eyed jinn. They made a search for the young man. "Where is he?" they asked the defeated jinn, "oh, where is he?" How long could the young man escape notice? They spied him and the beaten jinn gave a shout of joy.

"Thou rascal," he cried, "art thou going to impose upon me again?"

The young man kept patiently silent. He was safe unless they felled down the tree and burnt it as no ladder could be found long enough to reach where he was perched.

Well, the jinns began to fumble when they realized that the young man was out of their physical reach. They were mighty jinns but they lacked the petty skill of an

insignificant human to go up a tree, and this young man made use of this trick to defy them all. They were not oblivious of the two easy methods of punishing the wrong-doer, by felling the tree or burning it down; but they wanted to catch him alive and make an example of him.

But even a jinn is gifted with intelligence, probably more if he is one-eyed. The last described jinn showed his superiority and leadership. "Let us make a living ladder," he declared, "and I shall form the lowest rung." He stood close to the poplar and caught hold of it with both hands. Another jumped on to his shoulders and paved the way for a third rung of the ladder. In short they began to reach startlingly close to their enemy.

The villagers took it for granted that the jinns would complete their operations and not feel satisfied till they had flung the bones of the young man to the four winds. "He has invited the trouble" was their hushed comment. There was only one among them who was anxious for him and she was the *nambardar's* daughter whose hand her father had promised to the young man. While all others were sitting in rooms bolted and locked, she was watching the young man on the poplar and saw with bated breath the progress of the living ladder. It was worse than death for her.

The events took a startlingly new turn. The young man put his weapons to use. He thumped the tabor, taking the jinns by surprise. There was a visible tremor through the living ladder. He undid the knot in the mouth of the bag and ashes fell on the jinns like a Niagara, blinding them. They never expected this reception. The single eye of the lower-most jinn was blinded and he was confused. Then came a loud voice reciting the doggerel:

The tabor goes dub-a-dub-dub and the ashes fall from the tree.
The one-eyed jinn at the lower-most rung, I have grappled with but thee!

The one-eyed jinn was already startled with the drumming; the ashes depriving him of his sight put fear into his heart. These words put him into panic. He felt his feet giving way under him and finally he collapsed. But before he could fall prostrate, the whole living ladder came down crashing and the jinns fell one upon another. While the tabor went on beating dub-a-dub-dub the jinns who had some life left in their bodies took to their heels while a good many left their carcasses behind, including the one-eyed leader. The young man thus exorcised the jinns away not only from his own village but from many others too; and the *nambardar's* daughter who had witnessed the terrible scene with her own eyes was ultimately received by the young man in his arms as his all too willing bride.

The Intruder

"WHAT can we do now?" said a peasant one day to his wife. He was apparently in despair. He had a little paddy in surplus but there was nobody prepared to purchase it even at a throw-away price. Times appeared to be really very bad for agriculturists, for he saw no means of repaying the debts he had incurred during the year. But even his sagacious wife could offer no ready solution for his difficulties.

They at last decided to send their son to the city as a domestic servant. "Let him at least be free," said the peasant, "of the demands of the money-lender or the vagaries of the floods." His wife nodded her head but apparently she was hesitant. At last the inevitable step was taken. Tender love for the child welled up in the mother's breast but in the face of stern realities she found consolation in the hope that the boy would be able to lead a better life in the city and before long pull his parents out of their difficulty. She accordingly baked a couple of loaves of maize for his journey which together with a plentiful helping of beans he wrapped in a piece of cloth. Dressed in a coarse woollen *pheran*, a skull cap on his head and grass sandals on his feet he set out for the city with a blanket on his shoulder.

In the city he met a sympathetic employer who engaged him as a domestic servant for just a pittance. The boy appeared to be intelligent, for not only did he satisfy the master and mistress of the house but also managed to pick up the rudiments of literacy by association with their eldest son who had some books and went to school. The master was an official in the local *tehsil*. The young ser-

vant carried his lunch to his office and returned home every afternoon loaded with office files which his master attended to at home. After a year or so the master found that the boy could help him by copying out portions of his files. He was surprised at his quick grasp and intelligence and found it useful to encourage his talent.

After some time the master managed to secure for his servant the patronage of the *tehsildar* and the peasant's son was accepted as a stipendiary in the *tehsil*. The stipendiaries belonged to a cadre of service where no regular salary was budgetted but certain emoluments were paid. Such stipendiaries established their prior claim for appointment as regular employees. The peasant's son, therefore, considered himself fortunate in having come within the pale of future government employees. His parents in the village were really happy to get the news. "I always believed that the boy would bring name and fame to his parents," said his mother. His father commended his intelligence.

In a few months this particular stipendiary picked up many intricate problems of revenue accounts which always defy systematization. By this time, the *waziri-wazarat* came on an inspection of the *tehsil* and sought clarification on several points from his subordinate officer. The latter asked his accountants and clerks to explain matters. Though many intricacies were smoothed out one or two still seemed to baffle everyone including the *waziri-wazarat* himself.

The peasant's son who had by now gained considerable experience felt that he understood the moot point and that he could present a solution for the whole problem. He made a courtesy with folded hands to the *waziri-wazarat* and submitted: "Most august and most exalted, grant permission to this humble slave to speak a few words." The prayer was granted. The stipendiary explained briefly the solution to the problem. Having heard him everybody felt that the problem had ceased to exist.

The stipendiary felt slightly elated in spirit as his face seemed to indicate.

The *waziri-wazarat* at once apprehended danger. "What a poor impression of my ability," he thought, "will be carried away by these men." "Who is this young boy?" he demanded.

They told him that he was a mere stipendiary. He asked for his antecedents and his face grew red to the very lobes of his ears as he learnt that he was a peasant's son who had worked his way up through the culinary service. "Beaten by a peasant boy, a cook's son," he seemed to ruminate. Had he been the scion of a titular family he would perhaps, not have minded, but he was smarting under the humiliation of having been beaten by a peasant boy. The wide gulf in their social status, their classes, were unbridgeable. It was intolerable for him to countenance the presence of peasants' boys and cooks' sons in the revenue department which was meant for the families of jagirdhars, rajas and nobles. He was beside himself with rage and called the boy to his presence in a quaking voice. The atmosphere in the office was tense with suspense. The boy advanced slowly. The *waziri-wazarat* caught hold of his garment at the collar and tore it through its entire length. The other was helpless. "Your presence here in this office," he said "is unauthorized. You should go back to your village unless you want to be cast into prison. Don't step in where you are an intruder!"

The ex-stipendiary stepped out of the office, cast a last lingering look on the *tehsil* and took the road to his village.

The Burglar's Gift

IN THE good old days there once lived a mason. The days were good enough except in one respect—there was not enough work for artisans of his kind. In summer he would be busy for almost twenty days a month. In cooler weather his services were in less demand and in winter he was confronted with a period of prolonged hibernation. Little wonder, therefore, that he looked emaciated. He was a good and clever workman but not all his cleverness enabled him to make a regular living.

This good mason had some rough and ready means of making some discrimination between his clients. As far as possible he declined to work for people who were not thorough gentlemen. Early in his career he had suffered once when he had worked for a man of suspicious character. Later his client got involved in a theft case and the mason's name was cited as a witness. He did not have the patience or the ability to face interrogations by magistrates or cross questioning of hair-splitting lawyers. He tipped the police officials and effected his escape. "It cost me a whole month's wages," he used to say by way of explaining why he was squeamish about his clients. "Dishonesty," he said, "has a chain reaction."

But, unfortunately, not even the best of us can always afford to stick to our foolproof principles in this imperfect world. This practice on his part begot a reaction and his clientele shrank. On one occasion he found starvation staring him in the face. Though he did not mind his own privations, he could not stand the hardships of his family, the sobs of his wife and the sunken eyes of his children. While he found himself in a tight corner, he was once



The Burglar's Gift

approached by a man in need of his services. Though the man had no ostensible profession, in fact he was reported to be a thief and burglar, the mason welcomed this opportunity without any hesitation and started working for the man at his residence. He was required to build a couple of underground cellars in the basement of the house, provide ventilation for them and make arrangements for lighting too. His client told him that he wanted to get the work done much earlier but had not been able to see it through owing to his (the mason's) reluctance to undertake the work. He obviously knew his objections and waited till the time was opportune. He paid a tribute to his skill as an artisan.

In the course of a few weeks the work was completed. The master scrutinized it and found no fault in its execution. While giving them solid form in brick and mortar the mason had in fact been able to surpass the fancies of his client. The latter was completely satisfied and said so. "This is why," he added, "I was eager to engage your services for this particular job."

A job well done deserves a reward and the thief knew it as well as any other man of intelligence who is aware of the value of proper public relations. He asked the mason to dinner the next day and added that he would then offer his humble reward. The mason was much impressed with the conduct of the burglar all through the period. He had been paid his wages every day and given refreshment too in accordance with the practice of the day. The client was all courtesy besides. The mason recalled to mind an ancient maxim which means "live and learn even though you have attained a ripe old age." What he meant was that his earlier opinion about people of shady character seemed to be antiquated and deserved an early revision.

He came to the burglar's house the next morning. He was the only guest. The preliminary greetings being over, he suspected that his host's temper was somewhat ruffled.

He felt nervous and was reminded of the fable of the giant and the dwarf. In a few moments he found the atmosphere surcharged with tension and felt increasingly uneasy. He wished he had excused himself but there was no way out at the moment. In a few minutes the uncertainty was ended when his host started to belabour him. It did not come to the mason as an entire surprise but he was remorseful that he had accepted this position against his better knowledge. His host was most relentless and appeared to be in one of his worst moods. The mason cried and entreated the burglar on bended knees to excuse his fault if any.

"I shall return to you every pice taken in wages," said he, "and the greatest reward for me is to let me go." But the appeal fell on deaf ears and the host relished every lash he gave to the mason. The latter invoked all the holy angels, the Holy Book and God to rid himself of the present misfortune. At last the burglar seemed to have got tired and stopped.

The mason felt very unhappy that circumstances had forced him to bargain his long practised principle. His very heart was bleeding not so much of the physical pain as of the mental torture it had resulted in. He quietly got up to go home but was prevented by the host, who in a stern voice bade him sit down. The mason had not the nerve to disobey and crouched again. In a few minutes the meal was served. It was a dinner of choice dishes but the mason, his body smarting under the lashes, could least relish it. The dinner over, the host presented to the guest a *malmal* (turban) and a five rupee note by way of reward. The mason was confused beyond redemption by this paradoxical behaviour of the burglar. But he quickly accepted the gift for fear of a more unpleasant one and begged leave to go.

"I shall be most happy to bid you good-bye after I place a valuable and an everlasting gift at your feet," said the burglar. In his renewed confusion the mason said nothing.

The burglar continued, "You did not ask me why I belaboured you so heartlessly?"

The mason was filled with mortification but said nothing.

"Look," said the burglar, "what I gave you as tokens of my appreciation will last a short while and disappear. What I want to give you now will last for ever and is sure to pass from one generation to another, and why I gave you a beating thus was to imprint the lesson indelibly on your mind and body so that you never lose sight of the great truth. The lesson I want you to learn is that you need not fear thieves and burglars as long as your doors and windows are well bolted and hasped. On the basis of my professional experience my advice to you is that you should always keep your windows and doors properly hasped and bolted at night to be free of the fear of thieves. You will please excuse me for the beating but the lesson had to be rubbed in thoroughly."

The Two Thugs

THERE was once a thug who plied his trade with reasonable efficiency and success. He was a past master in the art of creating illusions which is the basis of the trade of a thug. Perhaps the most paying line of the business would be to sell brass for gold; but in such a transaction people secure the advice of a reliable goldsmith. The thug called himself a tradesman. If anybody asked him, "What do you deal in?" "Whatever holds the promise of a meagre profit", he would reply, thus reserving to himself the right of dealing in any commodity he liked, from oilseeds to pashmina, from saffron to sandalwood.

It was not his way to keep his wares in a shop for sale. Indeed, he never made use of a permanent premise as a shop. He sojourned to different places of pilgrimage or fairs as Tsrarisharief, Pakharpora, Aishmukam, Anantnag, Bomai, Badgam, Handwara, Trehgam, Tulamula, where people collected in tens of thousands for a few days and brisk marketing took place. They were in a mood to spend without undue higgling and that is what the thug took advantage of. He also hawked his wares from street to street, or engaged a little *dinghy* occasionally to acquaint the naive boatwomen on the waterways of Kashmir with the wealth and quality of his merchandise.

Once the thug joined the fair at the far off shrine of the saint of Bomai. There were lots of people come from distant villages to pay their homage to the memory of the saint. There were musicians and singers entertaining the onlookers with their *naat* and *quwali*; there were wrestlers come for their annual meet; there were *bhands* or itinerant actors, and there were magicians beguiling the people with

the sleight of their hands. There, of course, were hundreds of tradesmen buying from and selling to thousands of villagers: the carpenter with his toys, yardsticks, balance-beams, teasers and winders, grain-measures, ladles, sandals, etc., the smith with his knives, scythes, spinning rods, cauldrons, horse-shoes, tongs, etc.; the glib-tongued tradesman purchasing thick woollen blankets from peasants, the agents of the fat and immobile mutton dealers of the city bargaining for herds of sheep and goats, confectioners, clothiers, sharpeners with their circular whetstones mounted on an axle, and, of course, shapers.

The thug had also wended his way thither according to an itinerary fixed well beforehand. He was dressed as a peasant and carried a medium-sized wallet besides his blanket. He had taken his seat on the ground at one end of the crowd. By chance another peasant carrying a bigger sack took his seat near him.

"How do you do?" the latter greeted the former.

"God's a mercy," replied the other.

"My good friend, where do you come from to this holiest of the shrines?" asked the former.

"I come from the distant *maraz*."

"I could guess as much from your talk and the look of weariness from your face."

"Yes, I had to foot a pretty long distance. And you yourself?"

"I belong to the blessed *Kamraz*, the region of droughts, poverty and lawlessness. How much land do you own?"

"Not much by your standards. Actually I come from Pampur where I own a few *marlas* of saffron-growing land. I have managed to collect a little of this precious stuff in this wallet. What is your sack bulging with?"

"The arid tableland of the village where I work yields little. So I usually go to Pindi in winter and earn a little to spread over the whole year round. This year I was working with a merchant who paid me in kind. I have earned this sackful of peppercorns for six months which

I shall now exchange for cash or kind. Are you interested?"

"I have myself to dispose of my wallet full of saffron and I intended to carry home in return dried fish, dried caltrops, sesame and other produce of your region. But it occurs to me that if I happen to get a suitable customer for my saffron I may as well settle a bargain to relieve you of your heavy load."

"As you please. But why seek another customer? Why not exchange our precious commodities without getting in a middleman?"

"It is well for you to regard my saffron no more precious than your peppercorns, but I am no fool to be taken in thus. Let us settle a price."

"I have not much experience in evaluating commodities. If you don't fancy my heavy sackful of peppercorns in return for your light wallet of saffron, you may as well look for a great queen to purchase your precious commodity."

This sort of conversation was carried on for a pretty long time, each one of them playing his role perfectly and camouflaging the intonation and uttering the words peculiar to the region adopted by him. There was a good deal of higgling on the part of the Pampur man who lifted the sack of peppercorns to judge its weight. The other man fumbled the outside of the wallet of saffron. "Do you doubt the genuineness of what I carry?" asked he as he tonged his fingers in to draw a pinch of saffron. "Look," he continued, "hast ever seen genuine saffron as this?" And he trotted out like a practised dealer the Persian adage *mushk aan ast ki khud biboyad na ki ataar bigoyed* (fragrance will out and needs no eulogies from the perfumer).

"Aye, aye! but the wise have cautioned us not to relax against any *gundum numa jaw farosh* that may be prowling," retaliated the other.

The deal was finally closed and the Pampur man came

away with the sackful of peppercorn while the other one was happy with his wallet of saffron. The former retired to a grove of trees and began to examine the contents of his sack. There were round berries of peppercorn genuine enough at the top but beneath that layer there was sheep dung. The worst suspicions of the thug were confirmed, for by an irony of circumstances he had met a fellow of the same trade upon whom he had foisted paddy husk covered with a thin layer of saffron. "I shall renew my acquaintance with him," he said in the spirit of, "I shall meet thee at Phillipe."

Before long the two tradesmen met at another fair but spoke not a word about their previous transaction. They came to be known as *Toh* thug and *Mengan* thug after *toh* or paddy husk and *mengan* or sheep dung that each tried to pass on to the other. They tried to play other tricks on each other to establish their individual superiority but not once was either of them caught unawares. In course of time they developed friendship and some affection, for they were fellow townsmen. But being men of the same trade they could not overcome their mutual jealousy and spirit of rivalry.

One day *Toh* thug called on his friend and found him laid down in bed with fever. The visits were repeated, for *Toh* thug saw it as his duty to ask after the health of his friend. There was, however, no improvement. Every time he touched the wrist of *Mengan* thug, he found his heart beating fast. "My end is come," said *Mengan* thug, "for I have never been so ill, nor for such a long time."

"Don't worry, friend, you will soon get well," consoled the other.

"I know better. The *hakim* has not been able to diagnose the malady. It is the angel of death that has taken his seat in my pulse."

"Oh! Why do you talk so wild? You must give the physician time to harmonise your rebellious humours."

"I am not a child that you try to console me. I have fallen on evil days besides and have not a pice left for my treatment. What can save me then?"

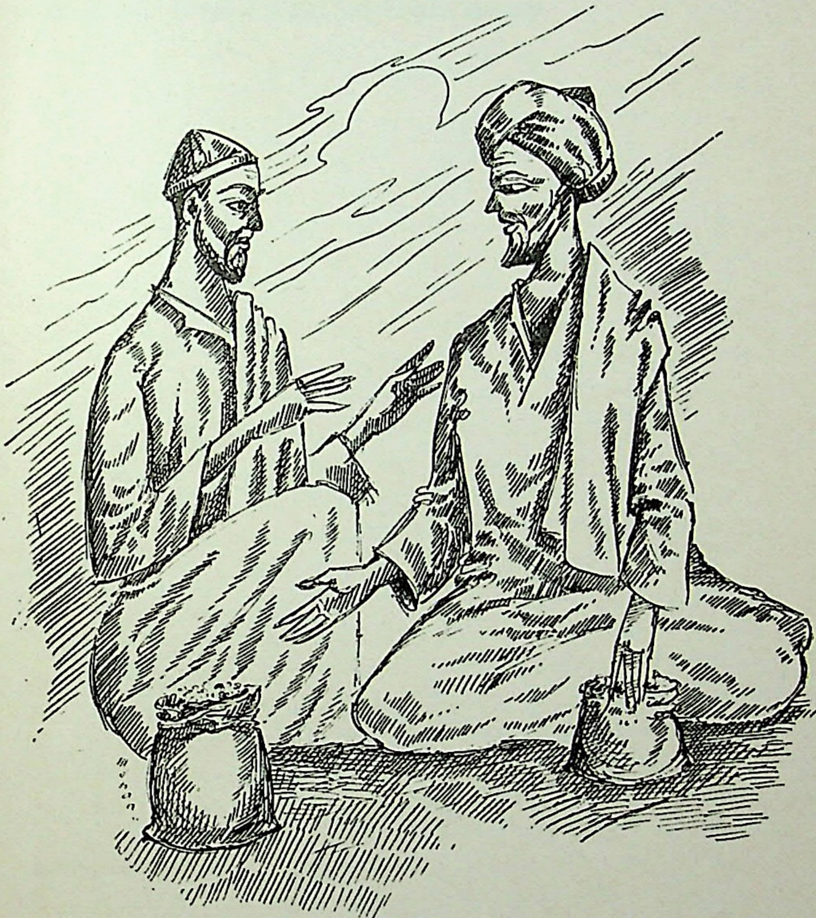
"Be cheerful, friend, you should not burden your heart with unnecessary anxieties. If you are really hard up why don't you ask me to lend you a helping hand?"

"You know the sort of person I am. I feel really ashamed to stretch my hand for help."

The upshot was that *Toh* thug passed on to his friend a sum of about two hundred rupees as a loan which the latter gratefully received. But *Mengan* thug did not get well. His fever continued to rage though his face did not indicate any remarkable trace of emaciation. One fine morning a message came to *Toh* thug that his friend had passed away. The former was really sorry though it occurred to him that he (the deceased) had met the death deserved by all swindlers. His own deeds appeared to him innocuous in comparison. It also appeared to him that he had lost the amount offered as loan to his ailing friend. That *Mengan* thug had not shown any traces of grave illness on his face, however, struck him as odd. "For aught I know, it may be a trick to defraud me of my money .... No, he could not have been so bad, peace be to his soul...."

He went to the house of his friend where they were about to dispose of the dead body. To ensure against any tricks *Toh* thug used unusually hot water to give the body a wash but not a muscle twitched on the naked body of *Mengan* thug. Ultimately the dead body of the thug was buried and *Toh* thug was left mourning.

In a couple of days *Toh* thug was bewildered to learn that the body of *Mengan* thug had disappeared from the grave. "I know the rascal was pretending all this to defraud me," he said. "He has hurled dust into my eyes and made away with my money. I'm beaten, I must own. Think of it! The feverish pulse and then the stiff carcass." He learnt that *Mengan* thug had developed a



The Two Thugs

feverish condition with the help of an onion to fake death. "I am immature and raw," he said as he carried a note to place in the house of his friend. "You've beaten me outright," the note said.

In a week's time he got back his money.

The Patwari and the Inexperienced Villager

THE rural areas in the east have now come to attract an attention unprecedented in our history and numerous officials work for the welfare of the villager. Not many years ago, the *patwari* was the sole representative of the administration in the countryside. Being conscious of his importance, he exacted homage from high and low alike, and they willingly offered it; in fact they did not feel satisfied till the *patwari* had accepted their presents. Experience had taught them that it may be possible to change what is written in one's destiny but nobody could rectify the record of a *patwari*.

There was incontrovertible evidence to support this contention. There was the *tehsildar* who openly declared himself in favour of a party in a land suit. The *patwari* had so far adopted a neutral attitude. But when he found the balance tilted against one party without the *tehsildar* so much as asking his opinion, he made up his mind to help the other party. No doubt he was able to make some money as a result of his policy, but he was able to produce recorded evidence in favour of his party that even the *tehsildar* himself felt amazed at his own inability to help his own protegé.

Then there was the case of a collector of land revenue to whom the ruler had made a grant of land for his meritorious services to the State. Since the *patwari* was not in any way obliged to him he submitted a report on the land available in his jurisdiction to the ruler. On the basis of the report the land that the collector got was almost wholly

barren and unproductive and did not compensate him even for the land tax. It was on the basis of such facts that the saying went round of the admonishment held out by a revenue minister to one of his relatives in a land suit that even he, the revenue minister himself, could not help him if the *patwari* willed otherwise.

Such being the power and prestige of a *patwari,* it was foolish of any villager not to propitiate him and, indeed, idiotic to ignore his presence. There is an ancient saying (*mudan hanza maji nai prasan truken handi gara ketha khasan*), "unless the mothers of blockheads bear children how can the households of the clever thrive," and there was accordingly a vain young man in a village who entirely lacked experience in worldly affairs. He was strong and devoted his time to his farm and his cattle which rewarded him well. Somebody had told him that he must be self-respecting and his notion of self-respect was to mind his own business, earn an honest rupee and let the *patwari* or other officials stew in their own juices.

The young man was slightly vain and certainly impolitic, and he had created jealousy in the minds of many fellow-villagers. They approached the *patwari* to pull the young man's ears. But the *patwari* was shrewd and advised them to be patient. He had a grouse of his own. Apart from the fact that the young man never offered any present to him his whole bearing was almost insulting. He never wished the *patwari* and to use his own words, "he walked with his gaze fixed on the sky." This, according to the *patwari,* was calculated to undermine his prestige.

The *patwari* had cautioned his friends to wait till the time was ripe and he started his offensive when it was so. He did not, however, take them into his confidence, for that did not suit his strategy.

Once when the young man crossed his way, the *patwari* greeted him in a tone of warmth and affection. "You do not know me well, but your father was a dear friend of

mine," he told him. "I cherish the memory of that friendship," he continued, "and as a friend of your late father I have something to say in confidence."

What he told him in confidence was that an unclaimed piece of land lay in the village which was open for anyone to bring under cultivation as a first step towards establishing his claim over it and out of deference for the friendship of his father the *patwari* was making the offer to him. "I can assure you," he said, "that I have not the least interest in it and as somebody will ultimately take it up, why not you do it?"

The young man saw the bright prospect of getting a piece of land for nothing and was tempted. Taken in by the profession of friendship made by the *patwari* he set about establishing his claim over it. He brought it under the plough, watered it and put a flimsy fence around it. He also sowed seeds.

All this time the *patwari* was quiet. The young man's attitude towards him had by now undergone a change. He respected the *patwari* and even threw to him an invitation to dinner as the only means of strengthening the bonds of friendship and affection between the two families. Everything seemed to be so nicely arranged till the seeds sprouted and tiny seedlings gave a nice appearance to the piece of land. Then one morning when the young man went to the field perhaps to do some weeding out he found another man doing it there for him.

"What are you doing there?" he demanded. There was no answer.

"Oh, I say, what the hell are you doing there?" he repeated.

"Why, do you not see, I am pulling out the weeds from the field."

"But I never asked you to do so."

"Who the devil are you to ask me to? I can do what I like to my own land without asking for your orders."

"But I ploughed it, sowed the seeds and put up a fence around it."

"You are raving, that is what you are. The land belonged to a collateral of mine and I have inherited it...."

By this time a few people collected there and the two saw the claimants coming to fists. Peace was restored with some difficulty and it was decided that both parties should approach the *patwari*. They did so but the latter had left for some other village in his jurisdiction. When he returned late at night the young man was already waiting for him. The *patwari* heard his narrative and said:

"Did you not plough the land?"

"Yes."

"Did you not sow the seeds and raise the fence?"

"That I did."

"Did anybody object to your doing so?"

"None indeed."

"Your claim is thus established and no one can dispute it."

The young man left his place satisfied. The next morning the other claimant also left the presence of the *patwari* fully satisfied. During the day, however, the two claimants fought with fists and shoes and cudgels and were with great difficulty prevented from using scythes and shovels. There was great apprehension of breach of the peace and ultimately the parties had to approach the court.

The court took a long time in recording evidence, examining documents and sifting revenue papers. All this while these parties had to woo the *patwari* for his support. Not only was his palm greased and overgreased but he was frequently a guest of honour at the house of the one or the other claimant. The vain young man's behaviour had undergone a change. The villagers could not help giggling when they saw the person who fixed his gaze on the stars once contemptuously ignoring the *patwari*, follow him like a lamb. And the *patwari* had a

peculiar wink in his eye indicating as much as: "Do you see how humbled is the haughty wight? Others beware betimes." It was a long drawn out suit and the *patwari* was transferred during the time it was pending. What happened to them he never bothered about.

The Upstart

THE house of the nobleman wore a festive appearance. In celebration of some important function an invitation to dinner was thrown to many relations and friends. The nobleman was seated in his reception hall, a large room on the ground floor. The walls were painted with arabesques in different colours, green, white, orange and blue-black. The ceiling was in the famous *khatumband* style. There were several large windows, consisting of beautiful lattice work provided with shutters of wood painted in a fine slate colour.

The windows were mounted with ventilators fitted with glass panes to let the light in when the lattices and shutters were fastened owing to excessive cold as on the present occasion. The room was covered with large carpets in loud colours.

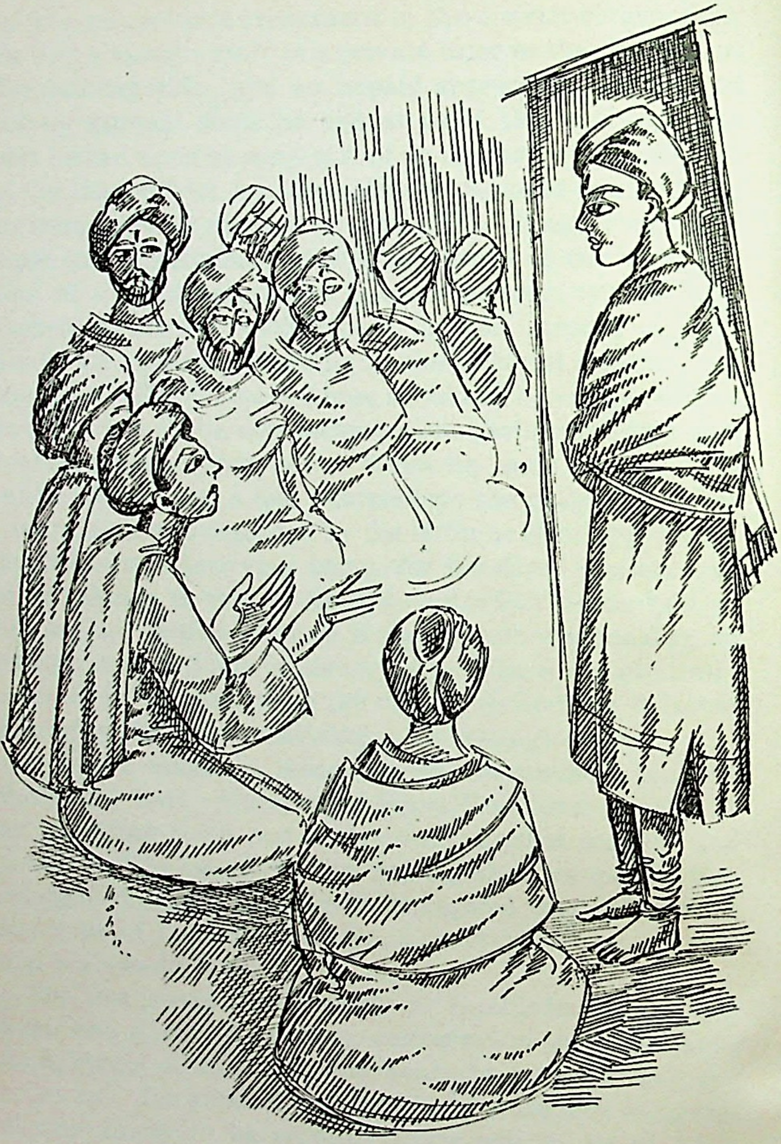
It was pretty cold outside and the guests arrived severally in their warm clothings, *pherans* with fine shawls or finer *pashmina* woollen blankets wrapped over. They took their seats on the carpet squatting in accordance with the importance of their social position or their proximity to the host in relationship. They shared the class tie, for most of them were landholders or state employees, and of course, they drew strength from one another. The face of the host reflected satisfaction as guest after guest arrived to take his seat. Ladies were being seated in a separate room in keeping with the age-old tradition. Conversation was warm and cheering.

There was a feeling of slight embarrassment on the face of the host on the arrival of one guest. He was neither a member of the elite social circle to which the host belong-

ed nor a relation. He owed the invitation to his office, for he was an assistant accountant in the district collectorate. He had a humble start as a private tutor to the children of the *naib-tehsildar,* and an unpaid apprentice in his court till by gradual steps he had attained this position. He was looked upon as some sort of an upstart by the families of the landholders, but was tolerated because of his utility in remissions of arrears of rent. This official was handsome and intelligent and was convinced of the contribution of a befitting apparel to one's personality. He was therefore, always well-dressed, in fact dressed a little above his position according to the sartorial standards of the time. Those others whose shoulders he aspired to rub socially felt it an encroachment on their privileges and looked askance upon him. When he came dressed in a white *pheran* and a fine blanket into the gathering of the hierarchy it was regarded by the latter as if he were carrying war into their very camp, for his dress appeared no whit inferior to that of the "blue-blooded." The host in his exalted position felt as if the upstart was making an attempt to beard him in his own den. There was naturally a scowl on his face when the official arrived but it lasted a brief while as he camouflaged his feelings at once.

It was a challenge which he was determined to meet there and then. He excused himself on some pretext to an adjoining room and sent for his trusted servant and steward. The two were closeted together for quite a few minutes while the guests outside regaled themselves with the brew of Ladakhi brick tea, a speciality of respectable and well-to-do families.

The host joined them soon after. Hubble bubbles moved from one guest to another, conversation centred round land, clever or lazy peasants, rent, the *tehsildar* and the collector. The gunfire from the Hari Parbat Fort announced the dinner to be served. There was, of course, fine *basmati* rice served with a number of courses in meat: *roganjosh, kabab* or mincemeat, meat-curry cooked with



The Upstart

turnips. The host went round from guest to guest inquiring after their pleasure and keeping up the conversation. He showered special attention on the assistant accountant at whose back the steward had taken his seat.

The conversation touched the early school days of the guests who, one by one, vividly recalled their *maktabs* in the house of the teacher and the instruments of punishment—the mulberry switch, and the rope hanging from the ceiling to suspend the recalcitrants in the inverted pose. One of them told the audience how he had once been made to lie naked on the bed covered with the prickly weed and was thrashed liberally with the same weed for the offence of taking a bath in the river. Another explained how as the monitor he was asked by the teacher to stamp the legs of the boys with his own stamp to prevent their taking a bath and how he (the monitor) was himself discovered by the teacher swimming in the river. They, however, expressed gratitude to the ancient school where they got a grounding in Persian and quoted liberally from *Gulistan, Bostan* and other classics. They were meanwhile kept busy with *pilau* with which pickles of cabbage and radish were served. The last course consisted of *kabargah* which when consumed prepared the guests for washing their hands. Two servants went round, one with a jug of warm water and another with a basin to help the guests to clean their hands.

Those who cleaned their hands took their *pherans* and wrapped their shawls or blankets. When the turn came for the assistant accountant to do so he was bewildered to find his *pheran* clipped to shreds with a pair of scissors.

"Who is responsible for the foul deed?" he shouted. There was a silence as every one of the guests turned his attention to the victim.

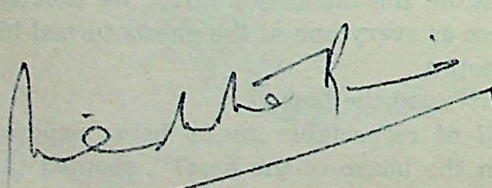
"What foul deed?" said the host.

"Who has heard of respectable guests being exposed to such villainy in the house of the host?" shouted the guest.

"No respectable guest has been touched," answered the host, thus clearly holding a clue to the mystery. "And" he continued, "as to the garment that has suffered thus, I am convinced that it must be grateful to the scissors for having been relieved of the unpleasant association with that body, for who has heard of petty officials making themselves insolent and odd in the presence of respectable gentlemen claiming nobility in birth for hundreds of years? Who indeed has seen a humble clerk dressed in *pashmina*?"

"Are you referring to my dress?" asked the guest. "If you mistake it for *pashmina*," he continued, "you are deceived. I am a wage earner subject to rigours of hard work. Mine is not the soft *pashmina*, the garb of the elite. You could have spared yourself all this labour. The stuff is a mixture of cotton and coarse wool, though it is well calendered and soft. Why did you not satisfy yourself before having my *pheran* torn to shreds?"

There was confusion among the guests but the host was heard repeating the words: "The upstart will learn to keep his place. Somebody has misled him into giving himself airs. . . ."



Two Brothers

ONCE upon a time there lived in a village two brothers named Panzuv and Manut. Both were in their twenties and their father had died not long ago. Though in no affluent circumstances, they could afford two meals a day and were not regarded poor. Their father had been a thrifty peasant who looked after his land as carefully as after his children and died with the satisfaction that his sons had been provided with almost everything necessary.

In a village where the assistance of solicitors is not available it takes the survivors a few weeks to get into the proper stride of domestic business. Accounts have to be settled with various types of tradesmen, with landlords and with neighbours. Changes in the revenue records have to be entered as regards ownership of land. The two brothers were thus preoccupied with these pressing matters for two or three months. Knotty problems, however, cannot last till eternity and before long the two brothers heaved a sigh of relief that they had settled their affairs to their entire satisfaction. They were now free to attend to the most important problem and that was matrimony.

The daughter-in-law is regarded as the corner-stone of the family in the East, the only link that perpetuates the race. It is through the help of this boat that we can bridge the wide gulf between the past and the future. Panzuv and Manut were provided with every material necessity but their mother was anxious that she should have a couple of daughters-in-law too. Panzuv was the elder of the two and in a couple of weeks the match-makers conveyed to the mother the happy tidings that the pro-

posal of a matrimonial alliance had been acceptable to a farmer in a neighbouring village between his daughter and Panzuv and that the wedding was to be solemnized within three days.

Luck had befriended Panzuv at double quick march. He was not averse to marriage but he was bashful and inexperienced. The news of his wedding within three days set his heart a-throbbing and his imagination afire. He did not know how to meet the situation; to make preparation for the usual feast, purchase garments for himself and presents for his bride. He was thus at sixes and sevens.

But his mother came to his help and she directed the affairs. Under her advice Panzuv the elder of the sons—and the would-be bridegroom—was to hold the fort at home while Manut, the younger one, was to go to the town only a few miles off and purchase various commodities like sugar, oil and salt. It was quite acceptable to both the brothers, this division of labour.

Early in the morning on the wedding day Manut started for the town. He expected to be back within a few hours. He did not return in the forenoon. His elder brother inquired about him but his mother assured him: "He is surely on his way back here." He did not come back even by the hour for mid-day prayers. Preparations for the wedding feast were afoot but Manut could not be seen. The anxiety of Panzuv, all too excusable, knew no bounds. Even their mother could not hide her deep concern. "Something is surely wrong with him," she said. But what could be wrong? Panzuv had not to cross any torrential stream, nor was there any danger of wild beasts pouncing upon him. Her anxiety for the person of Manut was not shared by anyone else. All the same there was great concern as the wedding hour was approaching.

It was nearing evening and the wedding guests were arriving. "Woe is me, for I cannot entertain them even



Two Brothers

with a cup of tea. This silly Manut has got neither sugar nor salt. He is such a slothful young man. I wish I had never asked him to go to the town."

"You can never be sure of how another man may handle your affairs," rejoined a neighbour. "There is a well-known saying 'Whatever I could not attend to personally, there I begot only daughters!' "

While the elder brother, his soul already hovering over the wedding ceremonials, was thus repenting his indiscretion in having entrusted the purchases to his slothful younger brother, their mother persuaded a boy of the neighbouring family to run in the direction of the town and see what happened to poor Manut. This boy had not gone far when he spied the younger brother whom he halloed. In short, both of them were safely back within a few minutes now.

The elder brother whose wedding was to take place within an hour was seized with fear when he found Manut freely swinging his arms. But he never even suspected anything and his first reaction was that perhaps he had engaged a coolie to carry the load of commodities. It was, however, soon clear to him that there was no such coolie.

"Where are the articles purchased, pray?" he asked.

The other replied, "While I was coming back from the town loaded with salt, oil and sugar, the sun beat hot upon me and I felt very thirsty. I felt my tongue parched and I was panting. When I reached the farm of our departed father, I found it had fared worse. It had parched and cracked into a hundred crevices. I could not help recalling to mind how our poor father nursed it with his life-blood and how he would sweat in the hot sun for it. I took pity on it in the name of our beloved father—peace be on him—and poured oil into the crevices so as to save it from absolute ruin. Haven't I done well?"

Panzuv stood aghast. "How can the guests be fed?" he exclaimed.

"And where is the sugar?" asked someone else.

"I was thirsty and I came to the fountain by the road-side to slake my thirst," replied Manut. "I tasted it and oh! the water was extremely sour, I tell you. I put some sugar into it and its taste seemed to improve. I put more and more till the whole quantity was dropped. And when I drank the water, it was excellent. The passers-by who may go to the fountain to slake their thirst will indeed bless me and our departed ancestors."

He had likewise left the block of salt in a field for the cattle to lick. Panzuv felt the earth slipping from under his feet. He held his head firmly with both his hands lest it burst.

The Merciful Burglar

———was wellknown in the gentry of the country. He belonged to an ancient family of repute who claimed many *dars* in their lineage—*kardars, chakaldars, tehsildars* and what not. Of course, he himself was a prominent zamindar owning many *khirwars* of paddy land. He was naturally referred to respectfully as "the Pandit," or "Pandit Saheb" among those associated with him in different capacities. It was believed that wealth earned during several generations in his family lay hidden in the underground cellars in his house. He had immense credit throughout the country among the businessmen as well as the populace. He maintained and even excelled the traditions of his ancestors in the observance of all formalities and spent lavishly on such festivals as the *Shivaratri,* the new year's day and the *shradha* ceremonies of his parents.

The Pandit did not hold any public appointment at the time to which this narrative refers. In fact he had been waiting for several years for the chance of securing such an appointment through the good offices of his friends. He had been deprived of an important position by the previous governor not because he had in any way failed to discharge his duties and obligations properly but because one of his cousins had out of envy and malice hatched a plot against the Pandit and he was cashiered out, much to his chagrin. He had already covered some ground in rehabilitating himself in the good opinion of the new governor and felt satisfied with his progress.

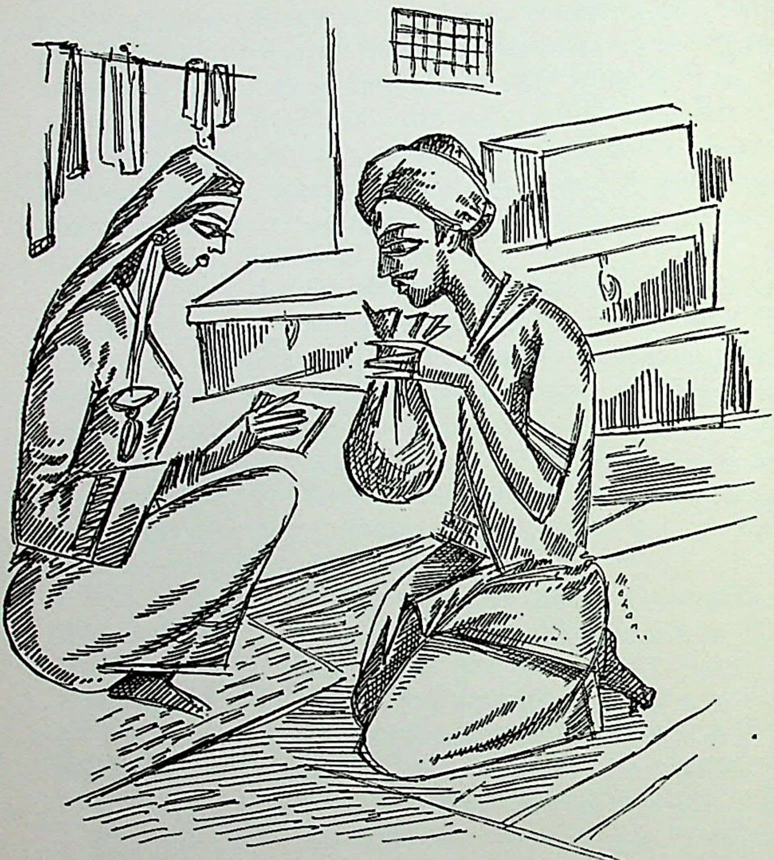
His financial position was by no means enviable in spite of what his cousins said—that he had enriched

himself with the wealth of *Kuvera* during the tenure of his office. Land was the only source of his income now and agricultural produce was worth little in the market. In the absence of any settled land policy in the State cultivators by no means felt attracted towards the "good earth." A man took to agriculture only when he had no other source of livelihood, and more often than not he gave up farming as he could not spare out of his meagre earnings enough money to pay his rent. A cultivator had to discharge other obligations towards the landlord besides paying the usual rent.

After having lost the official patronage the Pandit did not reduce the lavish expenditure of his household. He felt that it would go against the traditions of his family established by his illustrious forefathers. He was also afraid that such a step would prejudice his credit in the country. He maintained a retinue of servants and maids some of whom had been in his service for decades, and there was the usual stable: ponies with their grooms and cows with their milkmen.

This scale of expenditure was in no way compatible with his present means and the Pandit was not a little worried on this account. He had been postponing the solemnization of his daughter's wedding on the pretext that the stars were not propitious for such an undertaking. But he was not unaware of the whispers of a rumour set afloat by his cousins that the postponement was due to his insolvency. This was a serious matter as far as he was concerned, for these rumours were more piercing than shafts of steel, and he was much upset on this account.

Misfortunes never come alone. In the wake of all these troubles came one day the astounding discovery that one of his servants in whom he reposed considerable trust had forsaken him and taken service with the person he dreaded most, i.e. his cousin. Along with the servant went all the domestic secrets naturally, and this was the worst of it. The domestic had broadcast that he no longer



The Merciful Burglar

wanted to burden a man moving about on his crutches. This was, therefore, the reason why the wedding of his daughter could not be postponed further. One night along with his wife he was ransacking the secret chambers holding their valuables when she fell down with a shriek, somebody had stolen into these chambers and made away with many valuable ornaments. The Pandit, therefore, went over the accounts of income and expenditure for the last several years and cursed his negligence which had suffered the servant above referred to and possibly his accomplices too, to defraud him systematically. His efforts to have the servant brought to book resulted in his receiving threats from the ungrateful wretch, threats of dire consequences. As the servant was guided by his cousin, and the latter never lost a chance in trying to do him down, the Pandit considered it expedient not to press the matter further for the time being.

The cousin was not satisfied with the success of his plans in bringing about the downfall of the Pandit. Nothing would give him (the cousin) greater pleasure than to raze him to the ground completely. He gladly accepted the suggestion of the erstwhile servant of the Pandit that a clever burglar be egged on to subject the house of the enemy to his depredations, and their choice fell on Layuq, the captain of thieves. Armed with the directions about the interior of the house, the underground cellars and the types of locks used, Layuq set about his task with circumspection and thoroughness for which he was known and dreaded.

The residence of the Pandit was built in the mediaeval style on the pattern of a square. The three-storeyed house built on all the four sides enclosed a space several hundred yards in area. There was one main entrance which led to the interior of this citadel, but, in addition, there were two or three inlets used by the domestics. When the situation of law and order in the country was not quite normal, all the entrances were well guarded; peaceful times, however,

admitted of some relaxation in these and other matters.

One night when the Pandit repaired as usual to his bedroom for repose his wife expressed her anxiety on the postponement of their daughter's wedding. The Pandit was usually a man of fortitude and forbearance and would not worry his wife with their deteriorating financial condition. On this occasion, however, he felt that he should reveal the real position to her and gave her an account of the various machinations of his enemies chief among whom was his cousin, who brought about his ruin.

"I have been facing odds with a heart of steel," said he to her, "and have consistently avoided every chance that might give you even a glimpse of the fearful chasm on the brink of which we perilously stand. Who would not like to discharge his obligations towards his children? I should have solemnized the wedding of our daughter several years back if I had the wherewithal for the purpose. The last blow has been the villainous act of the ungrateful servant who, false to his salt, not only left our service but robbed us of valuables worth a good deal and must have betrayed our secrets to the very enemy who brought about my downfall."

"But," retorted his wife, "why have you been holding these secrets away from me? If I deserve to enjoy your prosperity, am I not worthy of sharing with you the sorrows that befall the family? We have no doubt fallen on lean days, but you could dispose of what remains of the jewellery given to me by my father to meet the expenses of the wedding."

"That, dear, is exactly what I don't propose to do. We have fallen on very bad times, but we have still some credit in the country which I don't want to strain further. In fact it is very painful for me to keep up the pretence of living according to the traditions of my illustrious ancestors. But the moment it is known outside how miserable we are, there will be no end to difficulties and troubles for us. Those who speak to us respectfully will

assume insulting attitudes, and those who sue the hand of our daughter in marriage will spurn it if and when offered. The governor, who seems to be favourably inclined towards me and to whom I am looking for gainful patronage will dismiss such an idea from his mind. Above all, our cousin will make merry to see us exposed thus. Therefore, dear lady, it is not feasible to dispose of any of our scanty valuables to meet our expenses and thus strike at the roots of the prestige and credit that we still enjoy...."

The Pandit gave an account of his troubles to his spouse in such a pathetic tone that she wondered if she could have, knowing all this, been able to stand the mental strain. On this occasion, however, she broke down and wept bitterly and cursed her stars that by a hostile concatenation had conspired to ruin them just on the eve of the wedding of their daughter. "The nose of our respectability is cut, thanks to our cousins whose thirst for vengeance upon us will not be slaked till they see us utterly ruined... hic... hic... hic...."

Her lord tried to console her but even he realized that for a number of years his affairs had been going from bad to worse without a single exception whereas all the blows aimed at him by his cousin were effective. So far he had never allowed his anxieties and woe to have the upper hand over his reserve, fortitude and manliness. But the proximity of his wife had a softening influence over him; his emotions ran riot inside him and considering himself sheltered from prying eyes, he also broke down.

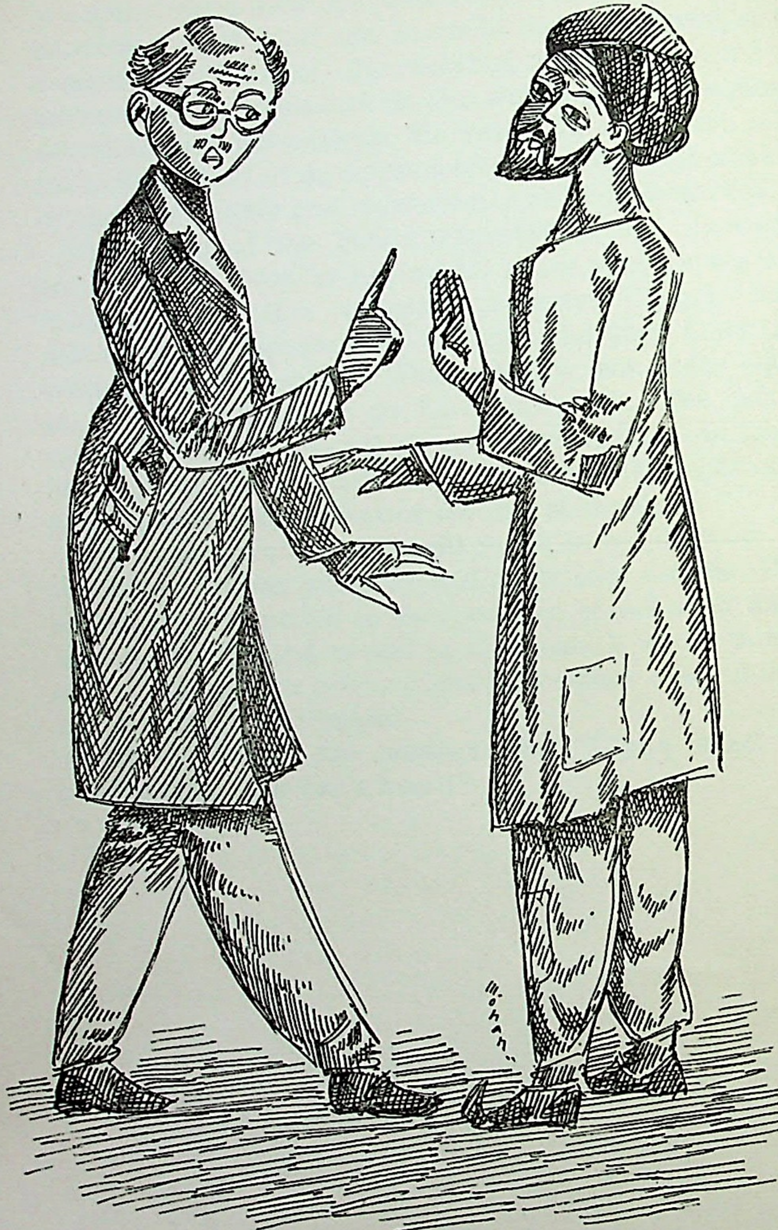
But they were not alone actually. Adjacent to their bedroom was the strong room where they kept their valuables, and the insidious Layuq was already lodged there, egged on by the agents of the Pandit's cousin. He knew the Pandit for a man of considerable strength of mind. He had been given exaggerated accounts of his wealth by the agents of his cousin and in his view all was grist that came to his mill. But he was the unobserved spectator

of a scene which none else would have the opportunity of knowing at first hand and he could see that it was not dressed up for his sake. He regretted that he should have undertaken the adventure on the wrong and misleading advice of malicious persons. He waited for some time till the lord and lady of the house were fast asleep, and slinked away as quietly and mysteriously as he had entered.

The cousin of the Pandit expected to add another feather to his glory by having his house swept clean of valuables and other ancestral property. Though the thing had not happened, he expected the good news to come the next morning. What actually took place was in astounding contrast to his expectation. The next morning he found that all his chests were rifled and that his house was despoiled of the valuables. They could not easily compute the extent of the loss suffered.

The same morning the Pandit found in his bedroom a small compact bag which he had never seen before. He examined its contents in the presence of his wife and they were surprised to find in it valuables worth thousands. Along with it was a sort of a cipher code which was not easily intelligible.

When deciphered the message read, "Layuq is not a mere burglar. He has a heart!"



The Clever Lawyer and the Cleverer Client

The Clever Lawyer and the Cleverer Client

ONCE upon a time there lived a clever lawyer named Ghulam Mustafa Khan. He had a roaring business, for he had the reputation for finding a solution to the difficulties of all his clients. His name was familiar to all those driven to litigation and courts. It was shortened to Musa Khan and to Musa in colloquial language.

One day his attention was drawn to a client who was unduly humble. He seemed to be much oppressed and miserable. He stated his business to the lawyer, sobbing. He was a petty shopkeeper and was the only breadwinner of a large family. His business had failed and he had been obliged to seek a loan. He had paid a considerable sum by way of interest but could not cope up with the loan and the amount had been accumulating. He had been threatened with dire consequences if he failed to discharge his debt promptly.

According to the law in existence then, the creditor could get a decree and have the property of the debtor attached. The debtor in this case had no other property except his house and what he dreaded most was to be forced out of the house after the creditor had it auctioned in conformity with the decree. He requested the lawyer to save him from this fate. He painted such a mournful picture of his difficulties that the lawyer, even though used to such accounts, was really moved with commiseration. Musa Khan put several questions to his client who told him that the sum he had repaid by way of interest exceeded the principal borrowed. Musa Khan was satisfied and

asked the client to meet him in the court of the Qazi.

Just before the parties entered the court Musa Khan took his client aside and talked to him for a few minutes. Soon after, the creditor and the debtor were called into the presence of the Qazi. "What is your plaint?" the latter beckoned the money-lender who gave details of the sum owed to him by the shopkeeper. "What have you to say to the charges against you?" said the Qazi to the shopkeeper. The latter twitched the lapel of his tunic but said nothing. The Qazi repeated the question louder to which the shopkeeper replied, "Kapas!"

"What do you say?" asked the Qazi.

The shopkeeper repeated "Ka-p-as!"

The Qazi wrinkled his brow and was about to say something in a stern voice when Musa Khan stepped in and said, "My lord the poor man standing yonder is. . . ."

"Ka-pa-s"

"Innocent and falsely charged."

"Ka-p-as"

"He knows nothing about the matter and has never borrowed money from this man."

"Kapas, kapas."

"He has lost his wits and is in fact stark mad."

"Kapas."

"What does he mean by saying 'Kapas'?" asked the Qazi.

"Kapas."

"My lord! my client was a merchant in cotton trade. He invested a lot of money in this trade, purchased a great quantity of cotton and stored it in godowns waiting for a favourable rate at which to dispose it of. While he was dreaming of a fortune of. . . ."

"Kapas!"

"My lord, while he was dreaming of a fortune running into lakhs he heard the news that his godowns had been burnt down to ashes. Since then he has been raving."

The Qazi was so impressed that he dismissed the suit of the money-lender and discharged the shopkeeper.

Outside the court the lawyer approached the client saying, "Are you satisfied now? You have been relieved of your worry."

"Ka-pas!" retorted the shopkeeper.

"Come on, let me have my fee now," demanded Musa Khan.

"Ka-p-as!" said the other.

"You don't mean to teach your grandmother how to hatch eggs!" said the lawyer.

"Kapas! kapas!"

"Let me have my fee, you villain."

"Kapas!"

Musa Khan saw into the whole business: he had been beaten with his own stick. He gave him a slap and shouted to the bystanders, "He is hoisting Musa with his own petard of *kapas!*"

Shabrang

IN THE long past a king of Kashmir one day went out hunting. The chase was long and the quarry eluded his arrows. He missed his way in pursuit of it and came to a garden where he saw a lovely maiden. No longer able to restrain himself he approached the maiden thus without knowing who she was:

"How beautiful you are! You are fit to adorn a palace and will make a pretty queen for me."

The maiden did not feel embarrassed in the least on being complimented thus. She retorted, "Yes, I too should like to marry someone like you and then my son will marry your daughter."

The king was intrigued by this answer and did not know how to deal with her as he was obviously outwitted.

Soon after he returned to his capital, but he could not shake the image of the maiden from his mind, nor indeed the words she had spoken. He sent men round to trace her out and learnt that she was a princess. He sent match-makers to her father proposing his own suit and prayed to him to assent to the princess becoming his queen. After due deliberation her father communicated his acceptance of the match. The date was set for the marriage which was later celebrated befittingly with illumination and feasting, music and dancing.

The princess came to live in the palace right royally and was attended upon by a suite of pages and maid servants. But she was never visited by the king, her husband, nor did he ever talk to her. The princess felt disgusted in a few weeks and made an excuse to visit her father after a couple of months. She did not report her

secret to any one except her mother. The latter was very much grieved but as no remedy suggested itself to her she advised her daughter to wait patiently.

Two or three years passed and yet the king did not even make a pretence of remembering his wife. Not to speak of visiting her personally, he did not even send a messenger to ask after her welfare. But the princess expressed no surprise nor made any complaint.

One day, however, she begged her father to grant her a boon to travel beyond his own State. "I am now fully grown up and yet," she said, "I know so little about the world. Travelling abroad will add to my knowledge of the world and of the marvels of creation."

Her father gave some thought to what she said but declined the permission. "You are not a man," he observed, "and I cannot make sufficient arrangements for your protection outside my principality."

But the princess insisted and expressed her resolve to go unescorted, all alone, if he did not grant her boon. Hard pressed thus, her father made all arrangements for her journey, appointing wise and gallant men to escort her.

The princess's sojourn was leisurely. She was well-provided with money and travelled in a befitting state in different directions. At last she reached the borders of her husband's State. She sent word to him that a princess from a distant land had arrived and wanted to make her obeisance to His Highness. The king was so highly impressed with the wording of her letter and the etiquette of her plenipotentiary that he came personally to receive her. She was, of course, in disguise and the king failed to recognize his wife. Overwhelmed, however, with the beauty of her looks and with the charm of her personality he invited her to live as his guest in his palace which she graciously agreed to.

This was the plan of the princess herself. She used all her cards—and her arts—so well that the king lost his

heart to her. She too professed to have fallen in love with the king and they developed an intimacy. After a couple of months the princess sought his leave which he was very reluctant to give. Ultimately, before she took her departure the princess got from him his ring and his handkerchief besides many valuable presents.

Within a few months of her reaching her father's palace the princess gave birth to a son. Her father was furious and said that his daughter had made him lose his face and slash his nose. But the princess explained everything to her mother and her parents admired her cleverness. The child was dark in complexion and was named Shabrang which means "of the colour of night."

As the child grew up he was given instruction in various arts befitting his station. But his mother wanted him to learn all the tricks of a thief. She, therefore, asked a clever and experienced thief to train him up in his trade. After some time the thief reported the successful completion of his assignment.

The princess wanted to assure herself that it was so and set him a couple of tests. In the first instance she asked him to get an egg from the nest of an eagle without disturbing the king of birds. Shabrang went nimbly up the massive trunk of an ancient chinar. He put his hand into the nest while the eagle was in and came away with an egg so neatly that the bird was not at all aware of the loss. His mother was satisfied with his training when he came out with flying colours from another stiffer test.

"Now you are fit for the task for which I have got you trained," said his mother to Shabrang. "All these years," she added, "I have been smarting under an insult and humiliation I have suffered at the hands of your father. It is now for you to avenge it."

Then she explained in as delicate a manner as possible that her husband had slighted and deserted her. She directed him to the State of her husband and asked him to commit daring burglaries till the king, out of helplessness,

would be compelled to win over the captain of the thieves by offering him his daughter in marriage. "When this stage is reached you should send for me before accepting the offer," she concluded.

Shabrang reached Kashmir. His dark complexion marked him out to be an uncommon man. His well-developed physique, his sharp looks, his agile body and his polished and courteous address created a good impression wherever he went. He made friends with the captain of the palace guards and in a few days he was himself offered a situation on the bodyguard of the king. He made a survey of the capital, took note of the important and well-to-do people, and studied the situation of important thoroughfares, canals and bridges. Within a couple of months of his employment he committed the first burglary and hid the stolen property in a hole under a tree in the fields. The news of the burglary spread everywhere. Though people felt concerned, they could not help admiring the unknown thief for his daring and his cleverness.

This burglary was followed in the next few days by several others, each surpassing the previous one in astounding cleverness and daring. The citizens had never been harassed thus and the guardians of law never knew a time when they had been similarly baffled. When the king heard of these outrages he reprimanded the *kotwal* and charged him to be on watch and patrol the streets personally. That same night the *kotwal* went round the city but not a mouse was stirring. He saw a woman drawing water from a well in a vegetable garden.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am a poor woman working here on this vegetable farm and came here to draw water," she replied.

"Why couldn't you do so earlier?"

"My baby is ill and was crying all through the day It has just gone to sleep and I rushed here."

"Did you happen to see any thief?"

"Yes, he came here last night to steal my turnips and threatened to smother me if I raised any alarm. He is likely to come again tonight."

"Then I may keep watch here and seize him," said the *kotwal* who vividly remembered the admonition that had been administered to him earlier that day.

"By all means," said the woman, "but he is hardly expected to come here when he sees you in your uniform. You had better exchange your clothes with mine and sit perched on the pole aloft to avoid detection."

The *kotwal* accepted the advice which appeared to be sound. Dressed as a farmer's wife he sat on the heavy end of the shaft. The woman pulled down the rope to raise him up and tied it to a peg on the ground. "I'll let you down," she said, "the moment he appears", and went towards her mud hut in a corner.

Early in the morning the king received the news of other burglaries during the night. He sent for the *kotwal* but he was nowhere to be seen. The report gained currency all round that the *kotwal* was missing, for he had not been seen since the previous evening. Search parties were sent round and the whole city was combed. The *kotwal* was finally discovered perched on the shaft which lifted water out of the well. He was overcome with shame and mortification at his gullibility and the predicament in which he was found. All his prestige was gone into dust. "Sir !" he addressed the king broken hearted, "I deserve to be whipped and imprisoned for my folly." The king, however, consoled him and asked the *wazir* to take in hand the arrangements for the next night's watch.

The *wazir* confident of his wisdom and experience set about his task in all earnestness. He patrolled the streets and found everything in order. Going towards the outskirts of the city he heard a grinding sound and saw a dim light coming out of a doorway. On reaching the spot he saw an old woman grinding corn.



Shabrang

"Why are you working so late?" he asked.

"What else can we do, protector of the weak?" she replied. "I should have been asleep in bed had not that incarnation of the devil come and beat me. He gave me this corn to grind and threatened to kill me if I do not finish it by the time he returns this way."

The *wazir* could not let go this opportunity and decided to change places with the old woman. "But your clothes?" said the old woman as she accepted the proposal of the *wazir*, "your clothes will at once scare him away. He will come later and beat me." Accordingly the *wazir* exchanged his clothes with the old woman and started grinding corn.

Meanwhile, having donned the *wazir's* garments Shabrang committed more startling burglaries. In the morning reports were again made to the king about the thief. He sent for the *wazir* but he was nowhere to be seen. Inquiries were made, search parties were sent round and the *wazir* was found disguised as an old woman in a state of utter mortification. "Sire," he said to the king, "time was when people considered me wise and clever enough for the exalted post at the feet of your majesty. It no longer holds true now, for obviously I have been baffled, outwitted and defeated. The humble prayer of your worthless servant is to relieve him of this charge and to appoint a really wise man in my place who can rid the state of this pestilence."

The king, of course, realized that the *wazir* was speaking under the stress of his humiliation and tried to comfort him. He consulted other wise and venerable citizens as to how the menace could be countered. They offered various suggestions but the king was not inclined to accept any. "This is an extraordinary emergency," he said, "and can be tackled in an extraordinary way." He said that it could not be a common thief or cut-throat who had set the police and magistracy at defiance and given an affront even to the illustrious *wazir* himself. He suggested an

unorthodox plan the novelty of which staggered the whole assembly: it was to be made known by the beat of the drum that he would give his daughter in marriage to the thief if he surrendered himself and took an oath to abstain from such deeds subsequently.

Accordingly the State was agog with excitement on hearing this startling news. Kashmir has a fertile soil for rumours which have a substratum of truth and wildest fantasies were built on the proclamation which spread all over the State in no time. "Who is the thief?" "Will he accept the offer?" "He is surely some foreign prince," was what the people asked and said.

The king held a public audience on the third day in accordance with his proclamation and awaited the hero of the burglaries to make his appearance public. On both sides of the king were seated his courtiers and the wise men of his realm. The atmosphere was tense with expectation and for some time it appeared as if the thief had spurned the offer.

The public crier once again renewed the offer on behalf of the king. There was a stir at the gate and walking past the guards Shabrang stepped forward and made obeisance to the king. "What could this foreigner have to say to his majesty on this occasion?" thought the prince. In the meantime Shabrang stood erect gracefully and declared in all solemnity that he was responsible for all the burglaries. It was as startling a piece of news as any of the exploits he had been responsible for and nobody could have associated him with a theft. But such is the love of people for taking credit for prophecies that everybody began to whisper into the ear of his neighbour. "Did I not say that this young man appeared suspect?" "Did I not say that only a foreigner could have done it?"

The king himself was surprised and when he demanded proof Shabrang took him to the spot where all his booty was safely buried. Everything stolen was recovered including the uniform of the police *kotwal* and the robes

of the *wazir*. The king was satisfied and made an offer of the hand of his daughter in marriage to Shabrang. The latter declared that his purpose was now fully served and no more burglaries would occur. The citizens heaved a sigh of relief and the *kotwal* and *wazir* gave gifts to the poor and the holy by way of thanksgiving.

Shabrang now sent for his mother intimating to her every detail. She was accorded a warm reception due to the would-be mother-in-law of the royal princess and was lodged in the palace. In due course the king, true to his proclamation, came to pay a call on his female guest and made an offer of his daughter in marriage to Shabrang. She said that she would have accepted the offer gladly but that could not be. "Shabrang can no more marry the princess," she said, "than a brother can take his sister for a wife."

The king was puzzled by this answer and frankly confessed it. Shabrang's mother then produced the ring and handkerchief that she had got from the king when she visited him in disguise before Shabrang's birth. She also reminded him of the occasion when they first met in a garden and the words they had exchanged then. What had appeared as a puzzle then had actually happened now and the king felt that he had really been outwitted by the clever lady. The king and his queen were reconciled to each other and Shabrang was acknowledged not as the king's son-in-law but as the heir-apparent.

Counting Ripples

EVERY community has its predilections and prepossessions. The American businessman is preoccupied with the interest on his investments. The retired British soldier bores his club-mates with anecdotes of his years in active service. Waking or asleep, the Japanese manufacturer can never divert his attention from how to lower costs of production and capture foreign markets. The Indian peasant talks tirelessly not so much of his wife and children as of his lands, his bullocks, his landlord and the money-lender. The average Kashmiri of the past, on the other hand, regarded government service in whatsoever capacity as the choicest profession. Times have changed considerably since the age to which the following tale belongs and the new breezes have blown lofty ambitions into the minds of men and women; nevertheless, many Kashmiris still love to picture themselves living in an atmosphere of grade promotions, privilege leave, clerical mischief and executive authority.

Several generations ago there was a young man of a respectable family. In those good old days it was not necessary for all male members of a family to earn their living. This particular young man, therefore, spared himself the discomfort of burning midnight oil in pouring over his books or the toil of apprenticeship in a profession. His family had inherited enough land for sustenance and with a "devil-take-the-rest" air he felt that rudimentary literacy was enough for his purpose. Nor did he have any occasion to resent his choice.

In course of time he grew maturer in the fullness of experience. He realized that though government employ-



Counting Ripples

ment carried very little by way of salaries or emoluments it carried a great deal of prestige. People spoke to a government employee much more respectfully than to one outside the pale of that privileged circle, and with a little cleverness even the humblest of such employees could earn a good deal without doing any serious harm to anybody. This young man, therefore, made up his mind to seek government employment not so much to make money as to command greater respect, to cut, as it were, a figure in public who would say, "Here goes —— who wields considerable authority."

While he had come to this conclusion independently, an incident occurred just about that time which in his view made it imperative for him to seek employment under the government. It appeared that his wife picked up a quarrel with a neighbour whose husband was an accounts officer. This lady taunted her adversary with the words that while her husband was a do-nothing drone she was the wife of a respectable and trusted officer of the government and added that she would realize the consequences of being discourteous to her when her husband (the officer) would set into motion the machinery of law and justice against her.

Pompous words these! But the smaller wheels of law and justice somehow got into motion and on several occasions her husband was asked to depose evidence or to explain matters and it squared ill with his own notions of self-respect. To secure a post in the State administration, therefore, became his greatest concern.

Having thus made up his mind he set about currying favour with the high-ups of the time. In those days of autocratic rule the modern practice of looking into budget provisions and securing financial concurrence was entirely unknown and the ruler, or his viceroy, could confer any office on anybody or give the sack even to the highest minister. But most rulers were conservative and therefore slow in accepting suits for offices. This young man

made use of a number of agencies with this end in view and when at last he was able to make his request known to the ruler, the latter appeared to him to be unreasonably strict. What he could gather was that there was no post to which he could be appointed.

He waited and renewed his prayer to the head of the provincial administration, but with no better prospect. Meanwhile, both he and his wife were burning with the feeling of humiliation which had been heaped upon their heads by their neighbour. The cold sighs of his wife were unbearable to him but obviously there was no help. At last he approached the high-ups once again and explained that his intention was not to secure necessarily a lucrative job; all that he wanted, he elucidated, was to command greater prestige and respect and that he would be satisfied even with a post that carried no salary. The authorities who wanted to satisfy this young man were well pleased with his offer to work without a salary. He had, however, little experience of working in offices and it was found desirable to entrust him with a task where he would not be in a position to interfere with the working of other government agencies. They gave some thought to the problem but could come to no definite conclusion. The young man renewed his suit and offered to do anything, even "to count ripples on the surface of the river" if he had the patronage of the government. They jumped at the suggestion and at last the young man was offered a situation: his duty was to *count ripples*. He welcomed this opportunity of gaining a foothold in the world of officialdom and was well-satisfied for his pains.

When the offer was first made it was done with the intention of filling his mind with disgust. Who had ever heard of any gainful employment which comprised counting ripples? And yet so eager was the seeker that he welcomed the offer. The nature of his employment did not seem to dampen his enthusiasm even though wags made

fun of the nature of "august duties" entrusted to him. They roared with laughter. "We have heard of star gazers," they admitted, "but 'counting ripples' is an addition to the tasks of a civil government." Among those who made ironical references to the new officer was his neighbour of the accounts office.

Despite all this the young man assumed his duties seriously. Armed with a warrant of appointment bearing the royal seal and equipped with a ledger and an encased pen-tray-cum-inkstand (*qalamdan*) he posted himself in a *doonga*. In those good old days the only conveyances on the roads were the pony or the palanquin. Those who make use of cars or *tongas* today had their own *shikaras* and the river was the main thoroughfare of traffic. The young man, therefore, moored his boat near a bridge at the busiest centre of this traffic, and he began to "count ripples."

In a few days this news spread all over the valley. His business of "counting ripples" was wildly talked of and people were left guessing as to the purpose behind it. Meanwhile, the particular official felt his stock rising and began to command greater respect. His wife at home regarded herself as respectable as her neighbour. To this extent the mission of securing government employment was fruitful. He recorded his observations in his books in the manner of all clerks. But his ingenuity encouraged him to extend his authority to fields about which his charter of appointment was silent. He urged all boatmen to propel slowly without "disturbing the ripples." This was something which they had never learnt all their lives, and they propitiated him, for obviously he could get the movements of their boats stopped for quite some time on the pretext of recording correct observations. Soon he found that though his post carried no salary he was no loser. In fact, he made a tight little sum every month and thanked the stars that made him "count ripples."

Then came his turn to flaunt his official authority in the face of his overweening neighbour. The latter was proceeding along with his wife and children in a *shikara* to participate in a wedding. They were dressed in their finest and the "counter of ripples" got a brain wave to pay them in their own coin. When this particular *shikara* was within hailing distance of the bridge, he had it stopped.

"What is the trouble?" the accounts officer puckered his brow.

"Nothing much," replied the other, "only that I want to discharge my duties correctly."

He started counting ripples and recording his counts; recounting, checking and rechecking. He took a really long time and yet his urgent government duty was not over. He could not allow any boat to move and the wedding guests were hard put to it. Time was galloping fast for the accounts officer, for both he and his wife had to attend to important ceremonials at the wedding.

Equally important, however, was it for the other officer to make correct observations and the nature of his duties would not brook the least disturbance of the surface of water! The wedding guest here beat his breast. Ultimately, however, he saw into the whole business of counting ripples at that particular moment. Both he and his wife took leave of their vanity, made up their differences with their neighbour and lived at peace with the "counter of ripples."

The Fugitive Fawn

THE village was within the forest area. There were ancient trees all around it, and rich luscious undergrowth invaded the village itself. Clearings of the forest were cultivated with maize and barley. A stream flowed down through the village and helped the lumbering trade.

The forest was also a *rakh* or game preserve and no one could enter it without a permit. A beast straying into the boundaries of the *rakh* would at once be impounded; and unless the owner redeemed it early it found itself with the auctioneer and the proceeds were deposited in the treasury. A man spotted there had to pay exorbitant fines for trespassing over prohibited area if he failed to propitiate the watchers. The status of the beasts in the *rakh* was higher in comparison with that of an individual villager, though occasionally they ran the risk of being shot at by people fond of *shikar*.

Man in the village and beast in the *rakh* were, however, neighbours and all the enactments on the bluebooks could not prevent the settled facts of their neighbourliness. Sometimes, while men were away at home, the beasts came down into their farms and had their fill with maize or any other crop; or men were led into the *rakh* in search of strayed domestic animals. Often parties out on *shikar* passed through the village, engaged village boys and loaded them with *bakhshish*, and sometimes the cops came from the district headquarters to hold inquiries into the *natural* death of a quadruped belonging to the game preserve. On the whole the villagers regarded the game preserve as a nuisance and would have it done away with. But they knew that it enjoyed the patronage of

the ruler himself who seemed to be even fonder of a horned beast than of a minister of State and if ever he took pains personally for anything, it was for the welfare of the horned beasts in the *rakh*.

Once it so happened that a fawn was led astray from the *rakh* and drifted towards the village habitation at dusk. Ordinarily the villagers would drive it again to the *rakh* and the matter would end there. On this occasion, however, the little beast was spotted by a young man of uncommonly high spirits who had an eye for adventure. He sat quietly till the fawn covered several hundred yards towards a grove of trees near the edge of a fountain. The man moved quietly and unobtrusively towards the grove, took the animal unawares and caught it. It was a feat unheard of before within living memory in the village.

So far so good. But what was the young man going to do with the prize? He could not keep it chained at home, convert his home into a museum and let himself be dragged into prison under the game preservation regulations. Nor was it feasible to kill the animal secretly and throw a feast to his friends because the truth was bound to trickle out one day with a tremendous bang. He took a couple of elderly neighbours in his confidence who, much against his expectation, did not applaud his skill or commend his valour but painted a bleak picture of the possible consequences of the act and led him to the headman of the village.

The matter alerted the whole village and people thronged to the house of the headman to have a look at the beautiful little fawn or to know how this unique visitant was to be disposed of. Many were tempted by the prospect of a community dinner and taste of venison, and urged the headman to bury the matter along with the horns and skin of the deer.

But he was firm. "Experience has taught me that the murder of a man or a fawn will be out, whatever care we take to bury the horns," he said. "For me," he continued,

"there is only one way open and that is to lead the animal back to the *rakh.*" He added, "there is, however, another alternative," and he paused for effect.

"What's it?" shouted a few.

"I'll tell you only if the elders promise to stand by me for the honour of this village," he replied.

"We are with you," said one.

"Tell us what you want," added a few more.

He gave them the plan. He wanted them to go down to the capital city, seek audience of the ruler and present the prize to him. "He is to reward us," said the headman with some emotion, "either by remitting the grazing tax, or reducing the rent on land."

The novelty of the plan swept the villagers almost off their heavy feet. The elders appreciated the wisdom of which the plan was born and the more youthful ones claimed their representation in the party that was to lead the fawn to the capital. Preparations were made swiftly and early next morning a party of eleven—a propitious number—left the village under the leadership of the headman, escorting the little fawn.

They passed over dry tableland or grassy meadows through villages or dusty roads, but wherever they went they took the onlookers by surprise; and every one praised the wisdom of the headman. They never felt choked with the dust or oppressed with the hot sun. The sun was shining vertically above their heads when they reached the river. Finishing their lunch by the river bank they embarked a ferryboat and with high spirits and large expectations took their way to the capital. The waves were alive with their songs.

Early next morning they reached the outskirts of the city. The boat stopped as usual at the octroi post and their difficulties began. Every head of animals was charged a tax. But in the long experience of the clerk a deer had never been led into the city and he could not say what he was to charge. The headman claimed tax-

free entrance of the "royal beast" into the city which the clerk would not concede in the interests of the State revenue. Ultimately the headman deposited a sum of money with the clerk in expectation of obtaining royal commands for its refund and probably of an order of dismissal for the clerk. This suited the latter as he would seek the advice of his superiors regarding the exact amount of tax to be charged.

The party directed their steps towards the palace. They and the little antler felt somewhat shy of treading over the tarred road, smooth, clean and polished. Sighting the palace gates they shouted at their loudest: *Maharaj ki jai* (victory to the Maharaja), etc. and people from the neighbouring houses came to stare at them and the little captive quadruped whom they were dragging along. "Is it a village circus?" they asked. The sentinels on duty at the gates, not knowing the intentions of the people, alerted themselves and the procession was stopped a hundred yards away from the palace gate and the guards asked them what they wanted.

The ruler known to be an arch-aristocrat in the city passed many times through their village and talked to the inhabitants in their own language. The headman had often chatted with him with a degree of informality. He, therefore, told the guards that they wanted to talk to the ruler. They did not condescend to let the guards know any more about their mission. But the latter knew the formalities at the palace and would not let them in. The corporal asked them what they were going to make of the deer and very reluctantly the headman gave him to understand that it was to be presented to the ruler. The corporal conveyed the intelligence to the captain and the captain passed it on to the private secretary of the ruler.

The small crowd was waiting at a little distance from the palace gate. Every moment they expected the ruler to send for them and to receive them in open-hearted glee. They had seen him extremely fond of these antlers in the



The Fugitive Fawn

rakh and he had often preferred to go without meals rather than miss the chance of giving them a chase. They cried themselves hoarse with shouts wishing victory, health and happiness to their ruler down to his seventh generation.

A quarter of an hour passed and they were still waiting at the same spot with the palace gates closed against them and the palace roads untrodden by them. The sentinels on guard who gradually gathered all details from them told them that the private secretary was about to bring the matter to the notice of His Highness. Their faces beamed when an A.D.C. came to the gate and told them that since His Highness was not feeling well he had asked his prime minister to attend to them and that they should approach him.

They again raised shouts of joy though less loudly and disappointment was visible on the faces of a few of them. However, the headman led them enthusiastically to the prime minister. The latter was completely taken by surprise, for His Highness was so ill that he had not informed him. The prime minister was an experienced and intelligent man who had risen from the ranks. He had had no time to spare from his duties to attend to sports like hunting. He shuddered to think that he would ever be led to kill a peace-loving animal far away in the forest, let apart doing so for pleasure. He was pleased to look at the comely animal and he remembered quite a few lines about its kind from *Shakuntala* he had read long long ago. But apart from that the matter touched no sympathetic chord in his mind. Forests, *rakhs,* and villages were in the portfolio of his cabinet colleague the minister for revenue and he directed the villagers to wait upon him.

Disappointment was now writ large on every face. The headman was burning with rage in the heart of his hearts, but did not think it discreet to express it. "I must make something out of this bad bargain," thought he, "otherwise my prestige as the headman is washed in the

blind alley that we have come to." He spoke a few cheering words and they met the minister for revenue. Here was another genius at the files and the decorum of red tape. He never bothered his head about such petty matters as game laws in the State but remembered many cases of international law and, of course, his Cuthbertson.

"Won't you give me the little beastie to ride, papa dear?" shouted a little girl, presumably his grand-daughter, who was watching the village folk from a first floor window.

He could not help the villagers in any way as he had never poked his nose into the game preserves which interested His Highness and his guests. In all such matters he was guided by the advice of the collector. He referred the processionists to the collector as a matter of course.

From His Highness to the collector, what a big fall it was! The headman spat on the ground, trying to clear his mouth of the bitter viscous saliva. His fellows and he were hungry and beaten with the callousness they found everywhere.

"My dear men, by ill luck His Highness is unwell, otherwise each one of these should have tried to seek your pleasure. We have amongst us probably a sinner whose presence has led us from bad to worse. But men are born to face odds, and who amongst men is hardier or more courageous than we who are constantly at war with nature and her ferocious beasts?"

There was no response from the throng and the villagers followed in his wake famished, disheartened and broken, to the collector.

The last mentioned officer was the only one familiar with local conditions in most parts of the State and he could at once visualize what it meant for the villagers to have come to the capital from the distant village bordering on the *rakh*. He felt pity for them and gave them a little money to enable them to have something to eat. Beyond that he was bound by the laws. He consulted the

warden of game preserves who gave him to understand that the villagers would incur severe punishment if he were to take official notice of the presence amongst them of the little fawn. He, however, was inclined to take a lenient view of the matter and disregard the offence. The generosity of the collector had won for him well-merited appreciation in the minds of the villagers and they looked up to him for some more favours. He had only to explain to them in detail what the warden had communicated to him. "The best course for you," he said, "is to go home quietly and set the fawn free in the game preserve."

The villagers stepped into the boat that had brought them to the city. They were poorer by the amount deposited with the clerk at the octroi post who having heard the story of their ill-fated expedition refused to part with the deposit which he considered well-earned. The boat pushed off, was pulled upstream and the villagers experienced a feeling of relief, their faces away from the city. The breeze was cool and they felt refreshed as they lost sight of the far-famed metropolis, and they sang in chorus, unburdening their hearts of the feelings by no means enviable.

The refrain of the song was: *"hanglo karyo lola mata lai"* (O deer, may I fondle and caress thee!)

Akanandun

LONG long ago there lived a king. His principality comprised seven towns and his capital was called Rajapuri. He was a kind and conscientious ruler and dispensed justice with an even hand to high and low alike. He maintained peace and his subjects lived happy and content under him. He was a god-fearing man and his subjects held him in reverence as their father. He punished with a severe hand all those who dared to trouble his subjects in the least. He took measures for the welfare even of the birds and animals living in his country. Ponds were dug to store drinking water for the quadrupeds and troughs were placed on perches to enable birds to quench their thirst. In all this he was assisted by able, honest and hardworking ministers.

His subjects had but one longing and that was for the birth of an heir-apparent. The king had but one queen who had borne him seven daughters. The king and the queen were highly devoted to each other but craved for the birth of a little brother to the seven sisters to gladden the hearts of the subjects and their own. The Prince would shoulder the responsibilities of the kingdom in time to come. Even his subjects begged God Almighty in their matins and vespers to grant their ruler the gift of a little son, and the royal couple did all in their power to secure such a coveted fruit. They gave lavishly in charity which included gifts of land, garments, corn, livestock and gold. Holy men from far and near came to Rajapuri to give their benedictions to the queen who also met the expenses on the weddings of many destitute girls and the maintenance of orphans and widows. Still the heir-apparent of

their dreams was as far away as ever.

The king except when busy with the affairs of the State was always melancholy. "What good is it for me to rejoice in my palace," he would brood, "when the line of my illustrious ancestors will come to an end with my demise? Happy are the poor beggars in my kingdom who look forward to the day when their sons can relieve them of their burdens.... Were it not better for me to renounce my throne and take to the life of an ascetic in the forests of the vast Himalayas or in the cave of Shri Amarnath Ji...?" He did not reveal this corner of his heart to his consort lest she feel hurt. She, however, had not given up hope and retained faith in holy men and ascetics.

One day the queen was sitting as usual in her chamber when she was startled by a call for alms. It was nothing new for her who satisfied hundreds of such calls every month, but this time there was a peculiar lure and a strange tone in the voice of the caller which demanded the personal attention of the queen. She at once rushed to the courtyard. She beheld a *jogi* invested in an expression of ecstasy. He had long locks of curly hair running down to his back, his bare body was smeared with ashes and he had a clattering wooden sandal under his feet. He had rings in his ears and his eyes were sparkling. He carried a beggar's bowl in his hand and a wallet hung from his shoulder. The queen requested him to name what would please him.

"Give me anything in the name of God," replied the *jogi*. The queen told her consort that the *jogi* was the very person whose aid should be enlisted in seeking fulfilment of the age-long craving. She gave him a handful of precious stones which he received in his wallet. The queen explained to him how she was pining for a son. She said, "God gave us a kingdom to rule and many rulers acclaim our suzerainty. But what is the good of all this splendour when we have no male issue to look

after it on our demise? Our seven daughters will go their own way and bless the homes of young men unknown to us. Would that they had a brother to shine in their galaxy as the sun!" she concluded with a sigh.

The *jogi* listened, apparently unmoved.

"With your permission may I say something more?" asked the queen.

The *jogi* nodded and the queen proceeded, "Only a few days back I saw in a dream a care-free man resembling you. He patted me on the shoulder and assured me that my longing would be fulfilled after nine months. O *jogi*, you alone can interpret this dream."

Cutting the matter short the *jogi* said that he would give them a son provided they returned the child to him after twelve years. "The child will be yours for twelve years if you promise that I can have him at the end of that period," he said firmly. The king and his consort held consultations and ultimately gave their promise that he could have the child back after twelve years. On this solemn promise the *jogi* gave them the assurance that their barren land would soon turn green and their longing for a male child would be fulfilled even before their expectation. "Call the baby by the name of Akanandun," he added, took a few strides and was lost to view.

In due course the queen was conscious of motherhood once again. At first she kept it a secret. When her consort made persistent inquiries she shared the secret with him on the condition that he kept it to himself.

"It is none else but Akanandun" said the king and rejoiced in his heart. "Was it God or man who granted us the gift?" he added complimenting the *jogi*.

"Don't count your chickens before they are hatched," cautioned his wife.

Nine months being over the queen was in labour pains and was delivered of a male child. "The *jogi* has indeed made his word good," said the king. There were immense rejoicings in the whole country on the birth of the

heir-apparent. Thanks-giving services were held in temples and shrines, and people came in large numbers to the ruler to offer their congratulations. Inside the palace everyone was mad with joy. The king who already possessed a stout heart for giving gifts was bountiful like a river. God had fulfilled his heart's desire and he tried his utmost to see that nobody went away disappointed from his door.

The baby was brought up right royally. There were seven wet-nurses to feed him at the breast. Their lullabies chanted melodiously sent him to sweet slumbers. They rocked his cradle which was draped in velvet and cloth of gold, and inlaid with gems. The baby was the dearest little creature ever born. His eyes and eye-brows, his nose, his lips and chin, his forehead and complexion—each in its own way betokened an extraordinary heredity for the little infant who shone as the light of the palace. His sisters fondled him in all affection and he was the apple of the eyes of his parents who were ever grateful for his birth.

The baby grew fast into a child and then a strong, handsome and intelligent boy. His parents arranged for his education in a befitting manner. Akanandun, for that is how they named the new-born as advised by the *jogi*, went to school with his satchel and drank the learning deep according to the fashion of the time. His teachers were not a little surprised at his acute intelligence and sharp wit. The boy imbibed all that was worth knowing.

While everyone looked hopefully to the future when the boy, in the fullness of his physical strength and the maturity of his wisdom, would relieve his father of the burden of ruling the State, there was one day a wild uproar in the streets. "What is all this hue and cry about?" asked the passers-by and heard back in whispers: "Twelve years are over and the *jogi* has returned to claim the child." People talked with trepidation. "Was all this a dream?" "And is the *jogi* really so callous as to deprive

us of the young prince?" "Will he blow out the lamp which is the only source of light in the palace and abroad?"

Meanwhile the *jogi* made his call at the palace and the ruler and the queen rushed out to welcome him within. Their hearts were full with the debt of gratitude for the *jogi* for the invaluable gift and they were only too eager to do something to repay the debt to whatever extent. They solicited him to take a seat of honour and to indicate what would please him.

He replied, "I have come to seek fulfilment of the promise you gave. I have not seen Akanandun for more than twelve years. Get him to my presence now."

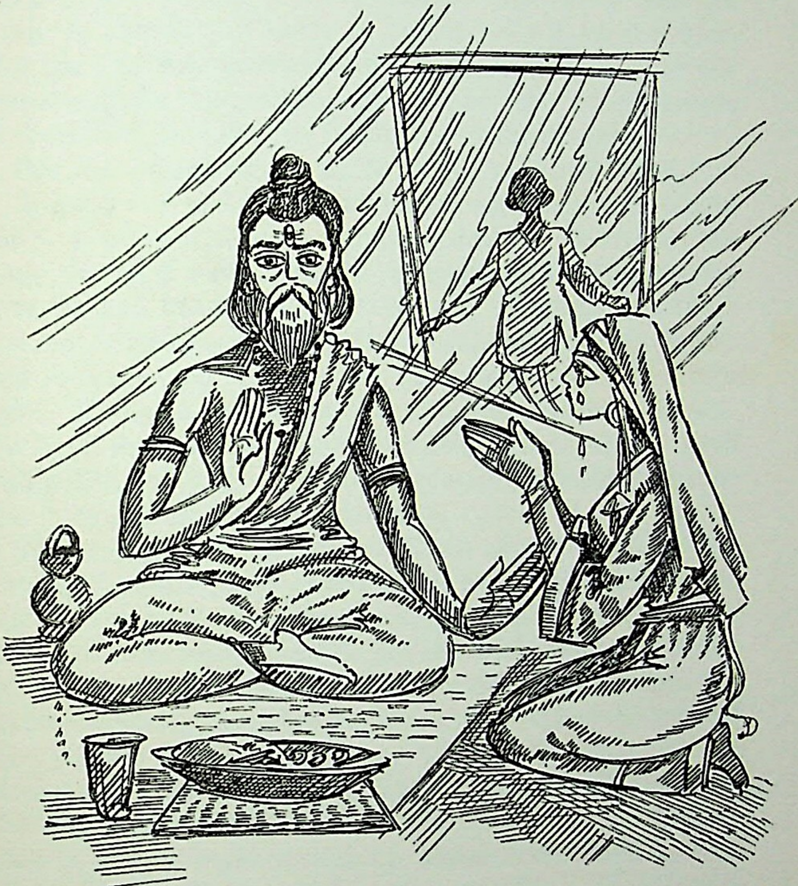
"The child has gone to the seminary. He will be here presently," said the queen.

"If you but name a precious gift I would deem it a privilege to place it at your feet," submitted the father.

The *jogi* promptly replied, "I have nothing to do with gifts. I simply want my Akanandun."

The parents made many subtle attempts to beguile his mind, but to no purpose. These attempts only enraged him. He called the child by name and the latter was on the spot immediately. They submitted that he was the one who alone sustained their lives and that their very existence was impossible without him. The *jogi* was harsh and stern, "I have to kill Akanandun and you will rue it if you try to dissuade me."

Everybody who heard it burst into tears except the *jogi*. He divested the child of his garments and ornaments. Warm water was got for cleansing his body to which his mother had to attend. The child had a bright and radiant body and the *jogi* had him dressed in bright new clothing. He had the soles of his feet dyed in *henna* and applied collyrium to his bright almond eyes. The child looked like a fresh-bloomed flower, but the *jogi* had no time to waste. Proceeding forthwith to kill the child, he got a butcher's knife. Everybody there cried but the *jogi* was entirely remorseless. He laid Akanandun spraw-



Akanandun

ling on the ground and asked his sisters to catch hold of his limbs severally. There was a tremendous intensification in the hue and cry raised. The king tore his tunic to shreds and his wife rolled herself on the dust. But the *jogi* was remorseless and reminding them of the promise given warned them of the inevitable consequences if they tried to shirk the fulfilment of the promise.

The *jogi* passed on the knife to the king and asked him to behead the child. Even demons and monsters would fail to comply with such a commandment. But when the king betrayed hesitation the inexorable *jogi*, overawing him, pushed the knife into his hand. Finding that there was no escape the unlucky father cut the innocent throat and scarlet blood welled out. The house was turned into hell. Who was so petrified as to resist sobbing and crying? There was beating of breasts, gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair. The blood stained the walls, coloured the floor and dyed their clothes.

The involuntary movement of the child's limbs having petered out, the *jogi* severed them, had them washed and began to hack the flesh assiduously like a butcher. When it was over he asked them to put the flesh into an earthenware vessel and to boil it. Akanandun's mother attended to it smothering her sobs and hiccoughs. The *jogi* warned her, on pain of dire punishment, not to lose even the least particle of flesh. When the faggots were burning bright, the *jogi* asked her to put the lid on. He also got oil poured into several cauldrons which were put on fire. The flesh was thus cooked as if it were mutton, salt and spices being added according to need. The *jogi* asked the queen to make haste as he was getting hungry. The lady could suppress her feelings no longer and burst out upon him: "Which is the faith that permits thee to eat human flesh? O stone-hearted *jogi*, how have I ever offended thee? Aren't thou afraid of the curse of the innocent sufferers?"

The *jogi* replied, "O lady, I am indifferent to all the

human weal or woe. You may take me for a goblin or an ogre, but I have to fulfil my promise. So, without prolonging the matter please attend to your cooking and tell me how it tastes."

In spite of her protests the unfortunate lady was forced to taste the soup. The *jogi* asked her to pick out the flesh and to cool it as it was his wont not to eat steaming dishes. He also asked for seven freshly baked earthenware bowls. The bowls were got and he distributed the flesh evenly among them all. The queen asked him what for he was dressing up seven bowls with flesh. He replied promptly, "Four are meant for the female folk, two will suffice us, two males, and one I am keeping for Akanandun."

This was a blow which cut the queen deep in her heart. "How preposterously the fellow speaks," she thought.

Meanwhile the *jogi* passed on the bowls to the people for whom they were meant and turning to the queen, said, "O lady, go and call Akanandun upstairs. I shall feel really glad to see him and I can't taste a bit in his absence."

This was obviously too much for her and she could not help saying, "O *jogi*, I completely fail to fathom your mind. I have suffered the loss of my son, but have not lost my wits yet."

The *jogi* returned, "I'm not what you take me for, O lady; I constantly change my deceptive appearances," and with that he gazed at the queen so that she seemed to have been held in a vice.

When he again asked her to call Akanandun from below she could not help going downstairs. And when she called him by name she was surprised to hear, "Coming mother." Anon he came to her as before, was held in fond embrace and carried upstairs where another pretty bewilderment was in store for her. The *jogi* was nowhere to be seen and the seven bowls of cooked flesh had disappeared.

The Mortal Utensils

THE ancient commandment of the Hebrews "Love thy neighbour as thyself" is almost literally practised on many occasions in villages, towns and cities in the East where neighbourly relations have existed for generations. Most easterners are a fussy people and a wedding or a funeral is not deemed to have been duly solemnized unless a large number of friends, relations, neighbours and acquaintances participate in it. On such occasions kitchens are run on almost a community scale and even a stranger asking for food at any odd hour may not go unrewarded. Every parent advises their young offspring to maintain good and intimate relations with the neighbours as they share the responsibilities and the jubilations of occasions like marriage celebrated on a mass scale and even grief and sorrow. Think of the requirements of a kitchen catering to the needs of 500 people for four days. Besides the consumable articles like fuel or edibles like flour, rice and oil one needs lots of things: furniture, utensils and what not. While there is no way out but to purchase the former, for the latter one can draw upon the co-operative agency of the neighbours built with goodwill, patience and sacrifice for generations, and the neighbour feels proud if his voluntary offer of assistance in any shape is accepted.

A clever man once hit upon a plan to defraud this "co-operative agency." He had some wit about him and set to work boldly. He requested a few of his neighbours to let him have the use of their brassware utensils. The neighbours lent him a few of their utensils each. A couple of days later the utensils were promptly returned. And

whoever had lent him anything got a vessel, a brassware cup, a tumbler or a dish besides by way of reward.

"What is this?" asked the neighbours, pointing to the additional vessel.

"Never mind, it is what your utensils have begotten" he said humorously. In Kashmiri, *begotten* is used in a metaphorical sense also and means profit or interest. As the man seemed to be nonchalant and humorous the "interest" that he paid was accepted with pleasure.

The plan was given another trial with a different set of neighbours and it was established that in the custody of this particular man it was profitable to lend the use of utensils because they always "begot" something. After the interval of a few months it became known that this good neighbour was again celebrating some festivities but on a much larger scale. Before long the need for kitchen pots and utensils arose and the neighbours were only too eager to lend the use of what they owned. On the present occasion all sections of the neighbourhood had to do their bit and the large number of kitchen pots and utensils indicated a festivity on a colossal scale. The neighbours were looking forward to the actual celebrations with great interest.

The celebrations did not come off. The house which was the cynosure of all eyes was quiet as usual. "What is the matter?" discussed the good neighbours. "Why are the celebrations not coming off?" "Perhaps he is in financial troubles," said one. "He may be looking for a loan," said another. "Why, what are we meant for if we don't inquire and render whatever assistance we are capable of?" decided the third.

The neighbours waited upon the gentleman. He was melancholy. "What bothers you, good neighbour, that we may together not overcome?"

"Gentle neighbours," replied he, "my trouble affects you also but with all your goodwill you cannot help me or help yourselves."



The Mortal Utensils

"Why, what is this grave loss weighing upon your mind? Unburden your heart, for we can see that you need some relief."

"My gentle friends, my good neighbours, the kitchen pots and utensils borrowed by me have all perished."

"Perished! Why, this is a language we understand not. Please make yourself more intelligible."

"Yes, they perished. They died as any mortal would die."

"But that is astonishing. Whoever has heard of a brassware vessel perishing!" said one.

"And I need my pots, *samovars* and pans," said another in excitement.

"And I, platters, bowls and dishes," said a third.

"But, gentle friends, it is useless; they are no more."

"How are we to believe it?"

"Exactly as you believed in the past that your vessels *begot* others."

The party was dumbfounded. This was a cool and calculated plan for which they had never bargained. The fellow made a fortune and they had not the power to touch him.

The Hydra-Headed

IT WAS a hot summer's day and the sun was shining bright in a blue sky. The people in the village had already done a good deal of the day's work and yet the morning was not really past. They could judge by the position of the sun that the hour for the mid-day prayer was yet far off. Presently a man trotted into the little village market on his pony covered with a pack-saddle. His own hamlet was a couple of miles distant yet. But he stopped at the shop of a friendly shopkeeper, letting his pony free for a little while to browse on whatever it could in the nearby camping ground. He himself began to eat a loaf of bread got from the shopkeeper. There were other men sitting on the shop-front, smoking.

"Yes, what is the news from the city today?" said one of them to him. The man had obviously returned from the city on his pony, having sold a *khirwar* of wheat-flour to a baker there.

"Things are pretty bad over there in the city," he replied. "Is it some epidemic that has raised its head or some drive for *begar*?"

"It is neither of these, but something more dreadful. The city has been invaded by a mysterious monster."

By this time more villagers gathered round the speaker and he related what he had learnt in the city. A monster had been found prowling about at night which played havoc among peaceful citizens. It lifted babies off their mothers' laps, tore men's eyes and women's limbs. The whole city was panicky and nothing had been found possible to give people protection against the monster.

"And what is the monster like?" asked a young man.

"Look at this offspring of a fool! Did I not say that it is mysterious and works in the darkness of the night?"

The villagers were left in bewilderment as the traveller from the city resumed his journey home. The only guess they could hazard was that the monster might be an instrument of justice sent by God to punish the sinners who were increasing in number.

* * *

The boat was moored to the landing site at Rainawari. It was packed to capacity with passengers, men and women, who shouted at the boatman to push off. But he was unmindful. In another ten minutes he got three more passengers, accommodated them inside somehow, lifted his long pole and pushed off. The passengers felt some relief now and relaxed mentally.

"Where are you bound for, mother?" said a Muslim to an elderly Hindu lady.

"Worthy son," she replied, "I am going to Ganpatyar. The daughter of a cousin of mine who lives there, I am told, has been wounded by this monster. Once I heard it I could find no peace nor rest."

"The fruit of our sins! But who told you about it?" joined another passenger.

"A neighbour of mine had been to a place nearby at Ganpatyar which had suffered a visitation of the monster. My relation does not live very far from the place, naturally I was filled with fears and misgivings."

"What evil times have we all fallen upon!" said another passenger. "A cousin of my brother-in-law met a friend from Sowra who told him that the monster had appeared in that locality also and wounded a woman. When an alarm was raised it had disappeared."

"Brethren, what shall I tell you!" said a white-bearded man. "Thanks be to God Almighty that we in Rainawari have been spared this punishment. Yesterday a man came

to us from Zainakadal who said that several women and children had been dragged out of their beds and left with pads of flesh missing. He had heard a religious preceptor say that this menace was bound to grow for several months according to the indications of the stars."

"Is it a fact that it lives under water?"

"That is what they say, but who can be sure? Nobody has seen it coming out, not even the boatmen who always live on water."

* * *

The same evening, scores of Hindus had assembled as usual in the temple hall at Ganpatyar for their evening prayers. Before prayer-time, however, they exchanged the day's gossip.

"Did you not hear it? They say that the monster entered a house at Rainawari through the skylight in the roof. The mistress of the house was sleeping on the second floor. It tore her breasts before she could wake up. She shrieked. Others woke up and seized tongs, sticks, smoking pipes and even ladles. They struck doors, windows, utensils and boxes so as to frighten the monster away with the rattling sound."

"And you should know that another man was sleeping under the shade of a tree not far from the river near Chhatabal yesterday. The monster chopped away his big toe and left him lamenting. A man who came to our office from Chhatabal told us the story."

"Did he see the man deprived of his big toe?"

"No, not he himself. It was his uncle who told him about it and the latter had gathered the information from his brother-in-law."

"Brothers, have you seen the monster?"

"How could we see it? It has not made its appearance in this locality. But they say it has its abode in water and resembles a monkey in all respects except that it has several heads like Ravana."

"This locality is under the benign influence of Lord Ganesha and no harm will come to us as long as we are sincere in our worship," said an elderly man as he got up to sound the gong for evening prayers.

"Come, brothers, let us offer our prayers," and the groups broke up.

* * *

Zainakadal was for long considered to be the storm-centre of gossipers and rumour-mongers. It was believed that on the flimsy foundation of dropping his spittle into the river a Zainakadal gossip could create quite a stir throughout the city. With the wild-fire of reports pouring in about the depradations of the monster all round the place Zainakadal gossips made their own contribution to the main theme. Groups of people were standing on the bridge that same evening, each of them pregnant with news.

"The cousin of my father's brother-in-law reported this morning that the Zaindar Mohalla locality suffered last night from the depredations of the monster. Two babies have been torn limb from limb while their mothers had been tackled first."

"I have been told that in Muniwar it bit the nose and the earlobes of a man."

"Who told you so?"

"I have a friend who learnt it from his wife's second cousin."

"My cousin knows a *shikari* who had gone to the forests beyond Shopyan with an Englishman. This Englishman showed him a strange animal with several heads in a lake in those mountains. He says it is the same monster who has come down to the city, but it is that very Englishman who could capture or kill it."

"Why doesn't the administration do anything to capture it?"

"They have asked the police to patrol but they have so far failed. It is said that the Resident has asked the Viceroy to send that very Englishman who saw it first."

"May be it is this very Englishman who got it to the city to trouble us. They want to take Kashmir and will do so by showing that the Maharaja is weak and inefficient."

"Whatever it be, Shah Hamdan Sahib and Mahakali protect our locality which has been safe so far."

* * *

Every house, every street and every locality was bursting with reports about the monster. Old ladies exchanged experiences of their childhood while talking about the monster and school boys recalled the tales of jinns and dragons they had read. The currency of reports was so astounding that even young men found it difficult to disbelieve. The sceptics appeared to have gone underground. There was panic everywhere, especially among women and children. Even in hot summer people slept inside their rooms with windows and doors closed and bolted.

One day a young woman was sitting by the window late at night waiting for her husband. The day's heavy work induced sleep over her and she fell adozing. The monster took advantage of the loneliness of the lady and advanced its paws to molest her beautiful face and her earlobes. But fortunately the lady woke up at once before anything serious could happen and an alarm was raised in the neighbourhood. A babel of noises, "the monster is here," "the monster is there," "the monster has stalked this way," "it has hopped over the roof," "beware brethren," "take care sisters," together with the rattling and drumming of wooden windows was heard everywhere. People rushed to their roofs and strained their lungs and throats in warning fellow-citizens all round. A few had whistles while many used their

conches to good effect. From the neighbouring mosque the gong was struck while a bugle came handy on this occasion to a young lad who had secured it.

The whole city was thus roused up to excitement and panic. Before long the police and magistrates were on the spot. To their inquiries about the monster they were told "it came this way," "it went in this direction," "it sprang over the wall here." .... But none of these statements could stand even a single cross-question. The whole neighbourhood was ransacked but not a trace of anything abnormal could be detected. Judicial inquiry into the matter came to the conclusion that it was all due to excited imagination. The immediate cause was that the golden ornament hanging by a chord from the lady's ears got momentarily caught up in the iron hook on which the window turned and exercised a pull on the earlobe.

The next day an inquiry was held in all the reported causes of molestation by the monster: of breasts torn, noses chopped and big toes lopped off. None of them could be traced. Finally, swimmers and divers were put into the river and the adjoining streams who kept stroke to the beating of drums and the blare of bugles. Thousands of people saw them struggling with the element so dear to the monster and felt reassured.

Thus was the hydra-headed monster exorcised away.

The Physician's Son

EVERY age has its Christ in the person of the physician or surgeon who is able to cure ailments wonderfully, nay, miraculously. In fact, in every country people always confer the title "the Messiah of the age" on somebody. The valley of Kashmir has been no exception to this general rule.

Nowadays latest developments or researches in the art of healing become internationalized in a few weeks. People can, besides, personally approach the greatest authorities in Moscow or New York, Vienna or London. In the past every district or group of villages had to be self-contained and self-sufficient in the matter of healing, consultation with an authority from outside the unit being unthinkable. This was true in a stricter sense of a country like Kashmir girded all round with high mountains leading to still higher ranges. Masters of the art of healing had, therefore, to draw on their own resources, intellectually or intuitively, though nature came to their assistance by providing them with a unique wealth of medicinal plants and herbs.

In this country there was once an eminent physician. He had not taken to the profession for making any sordid gains but because the art of healing had come to him in his heritage from his forefathers. He had thus the advantage of the experiments and researches of several generations, and his books were enriched with formulae of specifics for ailments in forms peculiar to this country. These formulae were the choicest possession of his family, the fruit of the brain-racking of his father and grandfather, which he would never be prepared to alienate



The Physician's Son

for any price. Every day he came to his consultation room at a fixed hour to find it packed with patients, coughing or moaning with pain, shivering or burning with fever. In a few minutes they would start going to the apothecary with their prescriptions. The physician charged no fees. Most of the patients would, however, place at his feet a few coins out of gratitude for the pains he took to heal them. Some would make this payment in kind: a fruiterer presenting him a case of fine apples or a fisherman a good *mahseer* fish. Wherever he went people offered him a seat of honour.

On his part he was no ordinary physician. People suffering from grave ailments also came to him and very few of them failed to secure relief. Once they got to his presence a young man who was reported to have lost sanity all of a sudden. He had been under the treatment of several physicians but no one could cure him of his malady. Even amulets from the adepts and sacrifices to the saints had proved of no avail. Eventually they had come to seek his advice. After a careful examination of the patient and consultation of the treatment he accompanied the patient to his residence and got him held at a certain spot on the ground with the help of pegs and ropes. Then he got a few pitchers of water dropped on his head in a continuous stream from the third storey of his house, a height of about thirty feet. This treatment was repeated every day for a week or so and ultimately the patient got round.

On another occasion a patient came to him complaining of an intense itch all over his trunk. He was tired of scratching his skin over and over again. "Even an ass could not stand all that scratching" he said. Of course, he had taken pitchers of decoctions which take heat off the blood and purificatory drugs based on sulphur. Every Tuesday he offered libations to propitiate Mars. But nothing gave him relief and he grew pale and anaemic. So, at last, he came to the "Messiah of the age." The

latter confessed that he had never come across a patient of his type. Itch was the symptom of several ailments but they were entirely different. He consulted his books and examined the patient once again. He prescribed a combination of oils for massage as an interim measure but asked the patient to report after two days.

When the patient called on the physician again, he prescribed a remedy that was startlingly odd even for those comparatively primitive times. He asked the patient to go to the slaughter-house early in the morning and get the warm skin of a goat freshly flayed. The patient was to wear the warm skin on his bare back and bask in the sun for an hour or so. Though the patient had grown somewhat disillusioned about the capacity of physicians to heal him, he was drawn by the novelty of the remedy suggested, to give it a trial. The physician actually found him basking in the sun with a fresh goatskin on his bare back. After an hour or so when the goatskin was removed from his back it was found covered with hundreds of lice rejoicing in the taste of goat's blood. The patient found relief at long last.

Once a prosperous butcher came to the physician and complained to him of some unaccountable pain in one of his eyes. The physician examined both his eyes and prescribed fomentations. The butcher left his presence with the satisfaction that his eyes would be all right in a couple of days at the utmost. He, however, made the present of a pound of sheep's kidneys to the physician.

After a couple of days the butcher came to report his condition to the physician again.

"How are you feeling now?" asked the physician. "I trust your pain is assuaged."

"Pretty bad," replied the butcher, "there is hardly any improvement." He gave the physician to understand that he was finding it difficult to attend to his trade and if no definite improvement set in immediately, his livelihood would be affected.

"Have no fears, my friend, you will soon get well. I can assure you that your eye will be purged of the affectation as surely as a fly is thrown out of milk," replied the physician. The butcher presented him a couple of pounds of sheep's brains before taking his leave.

The butcher continued to come to the physician daily for fresh instructions and every time he got for him a present. He did feel some improvement but not quite. He felt pain off and on but had the confidence that he would be cured completely in a few days. He had a feeling that the affliction had been caused by some chronic imbalance between humours and would ultimately disappear. However, he continued his visits to the physician with appropriate presents ranging from a sizable quantity of bone marrow to finest mutton embedded in layers of fat.

One day the butcher was busy at his shop longer than usual and the physician had been called to attend to an emergency case some distance from his residence. The butcher was, therefore, disappointed not to find him in the consultation room. Instead, he found the physician's son who was his father's assistant. Though unwilling to entrust his case to the comparatively less experienced hands of the junior, the butcher ultimately approached the younger physician on the plea that half-a-loaf is better than none. The young man examined the eyes of the butcher carefully and detected the presence of a particle of bone under the eyelid. He removed it and the butcher found relief almost immediately.

The next day the physician found the dinner rather uninviting. It consisted of the *sag* and rice of the average Kashmiri. It made his mouth water to think of the savoury meat delicacies he had been enjoying for the few days immediately preceding.

"I say" said he, "did that butcher with a swollen eye come to you?"

"Yes, father," replied the son, "I got out a fine particle

of bone from under his eyelid and he has no more pain now."

"Is that so?" said the elder, "a fine physician you are indeed! Did I not know that there was a particle of bone under the eyelid? You deserve that diet of coarse hard-fibred vegetables for your skill as physician and you will regret you had not enjoyed those savoury delicacies a little longer!"

The Professional Wedding Guest

THEY were professional wedding guests, two among dozens of the tribe, and they knew each other as such. In the spirit of the old adage "Two of a trade never agree" they looked askance at each other when meeting in the same dining hall on the occasion of a festive wedding. When the hymeneal season was far off, as in the cold frosty days of winter, they met with a degree of cordiality and talked genially. But in the wedding season even a distant glimpse of the other's face made each of them react with a start and when one confronted the other in a dining hall, "jealousy" was a very mild word to express the reaction in their minds.

The heading of this chapter may appear a little paradoxical or confusing to those who are not "to the manner born." Ordinarily, a man or woman assumes the status of a guest when he or she attends a function in response to an invitation accorded by the host. One can never be a guest on one's own, i.e. unilaterally. The number of guests is usually limited and nobody can be a guest on his own choosing. But Kashmir is a place where the number of guests is never limited, especially on weddings which are celebrated with feasting on a large scale. Over a thousand guests have their dinner on the wedding of even a humble man or woman. Everybody who walks in is entreated to favour the host by participating in the feast and plates full of savoury food are sent round to neighbours, friends and relations. Any one can take advantage of these conditions and assume the status of

a guest, and if a person is gifted with some perseverance, he soon blooms into a professional wedding-guest and makes the best of the wedding season.

The professional wedding-guest is generally a bachelor out of necessity. This presupposes a low social and economic level. There is no female living in his house either as mother, sister or daughter, and he has to cook the meals himself. This shortcoming also affects the number and nature of his social contacts. He, therefore, looks forward to the wedding-season as a period of relaxation from the drudgery of cooking. During these days he is raised to the status of the vast majority of fellow-citizens who have meals cooked for them by a servant or a female member of the family. He puts on a clean dress of old-fashioned respectability and he steps into the dining hall in solo company. Day after day in that season he dines out wherever his fancy carries him. Though he may feel a slight diffidence while making his debut, in course of time he is galvanized with confidence and the right of prescription. When the dinner is over the hosts compare notes to find out who were missed and they are thus enabled to know who were the "professional" guests. This gives tacit recognition to his initiation and if anybody so much as raises his eyebrows, he can face the person with perfect nonchalance and even rise to the occasion to make a suitable retort. But the established professional guests resist the entry of every new member into their fraternity even as the poets of the past frowned on every aspiring versifier. The hardened professional guests do not accept the *fait accompli* till the new entrant establishes his survival beyond any shadow of doubt.

Two professional guests met in the dining hall on the occasion of a wedding when the tastefully decorated hall was occupied by about 150 other guests accompanying the bridegroom to witness his winning the lovely bride. Each of the professional guests shied at the other, though unobtrusively. "What an ill omen!" was the

reaction of each of them, "would that I had never stepped in here." But it was too late for retreat which would have amounted to utter route by the enemy and exposing one's identity as a "professional" guest. So each of them decided in a split-second to stay put and to make the best of a bad bargain. By a curious herd-instinct they sat on the floor—all guests in a community dinner of this sort sit on the floor—in rows facing one another and the two "professional" guests would have been seated face to face but for the interposition of two "amateur" guests.

The dinner was being served and the guests relished the fare if one can relish viands prepared at a time for the consumption of nearly a thousand guests. To give utmost satisfaction to the guests the hosts went round requesting people to accept another helping of one course or another. One of the "professional" guests was persuaded to accept an additional helping of rice and cauliflower. The other "professional" guest, the elder of the two, who had missed the opportunity, rued his loss and could not contain himself with jealousy.

He burst out, "Look, sirrah! how much will you gormandize? Won't your belly go burst?"

The other was mentally prepared for an onslaught from his fellow-trader and without in the least minding the environment—the bridegroom, the wedding guests and a legion of hosts—he gave himself away when he retorted, "That leather-bag of your belly has already been stuffed with all that you could lay your dirty hands upon. I take no notice of the ravings of pariah-dogs or uninvited guests like you."

This was a grave provocation and the first was hardly worth his salt if he pocketed this insult. He retaliated befittingly and in fact overshort the mark. The festive dining hall was converted into a fish-market with everybody looking in the direction of the two uninvited guests who gesticulated and exchanged filthy words. The hosts considered this ugly development as an unfavourable

omen. The father of the bridegroom concurred and one of them led the two guests by the ear out of the dining hall.

It was a situation never dreamt of by the "professional" guests even in their blackest nightmares. They at once forgot the mutual jealousy and helped each other flee the locality lest they be subjected to further indignity. After being on their feet for ten or fifteen minutes they felt comparatively relieved and could not help apportioning blame for this grave insult.

"Had you not said the foul words ...," started the younger one to which the first replied, "What though I said a few harmless words? You are none of the babes muling in their cradles...."

But this mutual recrimination did not survive long. Both came to the graver issue of the insult under which each was smarting. They were exposed as uninvited guests: the cuckold is reconciled to his lot ordinarily until he suspects people perceiving his horns; a gossip is happy only till the moment he is sure he has not over-reached himself; and an uninvited guest goes about his business with a fund of self-confidence till he feels he has betrayed his identity. It was shocking, no less than the actual insult.

"Being driven out thus by the ear with a thousand eyes looking upon me," said the elder, "think of it, my friend. I have been going about thus for forty years, long before noodles like you started babbling and, I swear, by all that is dear to me, that all through I was respected almost like a son-in-law. Now I see why my left eye was throbbing since early morning. If the earth gaped wide enough I would very much wish to jump in."

The younger one gave him a patient hearing and finally retorted, "I wouldn't talk so if I were you."

"Why, what are you upto after that last licking?"

"I have accepted their challenge and I shall certainly be even with them. I'll have my retribution."

"Vengeance! retribution! What language is that? Are you raving?"

"I am not raving, but if you follow my ways, you will see how some of them who insulted us will rave."

The younger "professional" guest was thinking ahead of the day as one gifted with imagination does. They had not been turned out by the principal host, the head of the family whose daughter was being married. He was known as a man of peace, tolerance and humility. They were led out under the instructions of a cousin of his who belonged to the nobility and was consequently haughty and clever. The younger "professional" guest knew that he had a brood of children to marry in the course of the next few years and he looked forward with robust optimism to an opportunity for revenge.

They had not long to wait. The news of the betrothal of the nobleman's son with the daughter of another nobleman soon spread out and the wedding was being solemnized the very next year. The bridegroom led the wedding procession from his own house to that of the bride's father. Hundreds of people participated; members of the local gentry, high officers of the State and many others. They had chosen the evening as the propitious time for the wedding and the illuminations glared to the best effect in the dark. Everything had been done in great eclat and everybody was almost bursting with joy. There was only one minor set-back and that was on account of the weather. In the month of July when the marriage was celebrated the weather is as unsteady as the lovers of yore, and there had been a shower earlier that very day. The hall on the second floor, covered with precious carpets became the venue of the festive wedding-dinner.

The guests took their seats of distinction in accordance with the protocol. Long-standing prescription gave precedence to guests who held high public offices or who were closely related to the bridegroom. The bridegroom's

father was, of course, the boss whose every word was law. Having seen to the comforts of his peers he was satisfied and he did not mind the rabble—white-collar clerks, distant relations or humble folk who felt honoured at this invitation. Nor did he notice the presence of the uninvited "professional" guests, "wretches" whom he had driven out of a wedding-dinner one year back.

Once again the dinner was being served. The guests had started tasting the delicious dishes which only the nobility could prepare. They were just *in medius res* when somebody started from a corner, made hastily towards the entrance and shouted with a touch of pathos, "Alack! my pair of shoes" and almost raced down the staircase. Before the guests could really grasp the situation, another man left his row wtih restrained alarm, shouted louder, "The rascals! they have made away with my pair of shoes. Shoes, sirs, our shoes, thieves are prowling about here," and slunk away.

There was an alarm. Almost every guest felt upset. Who relishes the loss of a pair of shoes? Not even the bravest amongst us can stand walking home bare-foot at the end of a dinner. There was unconcealed panic writ large on the face of every guest and before the mischief could be inquired into or other steps taken to allay panic or suspicion, almost every guest was on his feet making towards the entrance. In this *melee* what was served for the tongue to relish was crushed under the panicky feet anxiously itching for the familiar kiss of the shoes. The hosts tried their utmost to stem the tide but their heroic endeavours bore no more fruit than seeds in the sand. Confusion, perplexity and despair were now stalking the festive dinner hall.

In another hall was the cynosure of all eyes, the lovely bride who richly deserved the bridegroom. But the news of the stampede came to the guests there with a bang. "What has happened?" "Why are the people fleeting?" "They have not had their dinner yet" was on everyone's

lips. There was panic here too which nobody tried to allay. "What is this foul augury? What sins have we committed? Wherefore the sting of a serpent while reaching my hand for a flower?" shouted the mother of the bride. Wild rumours were being whispered by lovely mouths. "The bridegroom's father has been insulted." "There has been a quarrel between the heads of the two families." "The bridegroom fell in a fit and...."

The carefree hours of a wedding conspiring with the fertile imagination of women resulted in rumours varied, pungent and infectious. The mother of the bride who was the first to faint was loyally followed by several others. The bride herself turned deadly pale but did not lose the presence of her mind out of an inherent courage or modesty. By this time, however, the cause of the unexpected turn the events had taken was fully established, the ladies came to or were restored and the nobleman related how he had dealt with the uninvited "professional" wedding guests earlier.

"True it is," said an old woman, "we can make atonement for misfortunes created of our own, but it is impossible to make atonement for the misfortunes which we suffer on account of the sins of others."

The Village Teacher

THE village about which this story is related maintained a school where education in the traditional manner was imparted to village boys. The old white-bearded teacher who taught at the school for thirty years had passed away, much to the regret of the villagers. He had perhaps never taught more than three or four pupils at a time, but his culture and good breeding won him a warm niche in every heart. He was succeeded by another gentleman from a neighbouring village.

The new teacher was a young man. He was gifted with all those qualities which make us look wistfully on our departed youth: energy, health, ambition, hope and vanity. Since his pedagogic duties did not tax his energy to any extent, he interested himself in other activities and was fond of the company of young men. In the midst of his friends nothing would distinguish him from the brotherhood of the laity. He even disclosed a strain of gallantry in his nature. Some elderly people recalled the fatherly attitude of his predecessor and sighed that even those who were expected to set the standard in public behaviour failed to maintain proper decorum.

The life lived by a woman in the city is different from that of her sister in the village. In a city the standard is set by the official class who for this purpose may be said to include the business and professional class too. Till recently their womenfolk, both Hindu and Muslim, lived in *purdah* and would not leave the four walls of the house except with a veil hanging down to their toes. There is no question at all of their talking to a stranger, however good-natured he may be. The village woman, on the

other hand, is free from many of the taboos in the city. She moves about freely and goody goody modesty is alien to her unsophisticated nature. Her conduct is a true reflection of her nature and not qualified by the fear of Mrs. Grundy. She is mostly a working woman assisting her husband in the fields or tending cattle on the outskirts of the village. She will meet anybody unflinchingly, be he a robber or even the devil, and not faint with fear like some of her sophisticated sisters living in towns behind latticed curtains. In spite of that, however, her conduct is unblemished.

The schoolmaster referred to above had certain preconceived and illusory notions about village women. He thought he could play the gallant and thus tickle his vanity. Women move about freely in villages and his own movements were so timed as to cross a number of them on the road when they proceeded to their farms. Sometimes he contrived to enter into conversation with one either on the roadside or at the village spring where they went daily to fetch water. There was nothing indecent in his behaviour but it sprang from a motive which did not appear to be "brotherly" as was the case with the village folk.

There was, in particular, a housewife, both pretty and prosperous whose acquaintance and friendship he wanted to cultivate. On several occasions he tried to enter into conversation with her. She never resented such an attempt on his part but, so far as she was concerned, the matter ended there for her. It never paved the way for a friendship or even what may be called an acquaintance because the next time he had to begin once again from the lowest rung.

Finding no indication of progress in this way he changed his line of action. The young boy of the housewife attended the school where the teacher taught. The teacher frequently said to the boy "Remember me to your mother". The boy carried the message as charged. The

mother realized that the teacher needed a purge for his humour and she chalked out her line of action. She told her boy to inform the teacher that she wanted to have a word with him at her house. It was conveyed to him that her husband was expected to be away for the whole day.

The heart of the teacher fluttered like a bird when he got the message. He felt highly excited and in his best attire went too early for the appointment. The housewife gave him a reception that seemed to lack nothing in warmth. She seemed to have placed full confidence in his friendship and gallantry. He could not conceal the lasciviousness in his looks and she reciprocated by pretending to gaze at him fondly. She busied herself in making tea for him and offered him a cupful.

While the cup brimful with tea was steaming in the hands of the teacher, a most unwelcome visitor arrived in the person of the owner of the house, viz., the husband. The teacher did not seem to be taken by surprise because the presence of the housewife had dilated his spirit and elated his vanity. The husband called his wife in a gruff voice from the yard. The housewife began to tremble and turned pale.

"I am undone," she whispered, "if he discovers you here he will kill me and not spare you either."

"Have no fear," said the teacher in a voice that faltered, "he cannot be so harsh."

"I know better how ruthless he is. Would to God I were dead rather than be surprised in this compromising situation." She began to beat her breast. "O quick, save my life" she whispered in a commotion which was now instilled into the teacher's heart.

"Is there no other exit?"

"No, none. He sees you here and I am killed. He is such a rough bear. Nothing can save me unless ...." she began to wail in a hushed voice.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you disguise yourself to escape his suspicion."

"Most willingly. I'll do anything for your sake," said the teacher out of a sense of gallantry and a trace of relief that a way out was indicated.

In a jiffy the housewife gave him a working woman's cloak and scarf which he donned as quickly, casting off his own turban and cloak which she put away. To allay all traces of suspicion in her husband she placed before him a basketfull of maize and two portable millstones. They almost acted a pantomime. She impressed upon him that he must look bashfully downwards, rotate the upper millstone and turn out the yellow flour. Needless to say that the other obeyed. Having accomplished all this she came downstairs to meet her husband so that he did not get a chance to suspect that the teacher was in the person of the working woman turning out flour.

The housewife greeted her husband with a face beaming with smiles. "What is that grinding sound upstairs?" growled the husband. "It is that deaf woman turning out maize flour", she replied aloud.

The husband and wife stayed pretty long in the kitchen garden and in the barn. The sound of grinding continued to come from upstairs though it was slow and punctuated with intervals of silence. The teacher developed many blisters on his hands. He thought of slipping away but knew nothing about where his turban, scarf and tunic had been deposited without which he was sure to attract the attention of the pariah dog no less than of man.

"The fellow must be tired now and feeling bitter" said her husband to the housewife, "you had better dismiss him now. The lesson must have gone home to him." The housewife gave the captive his clothes and the teacher slipped away without exchanging another word.

It was remarked by many people the next day that the teacher had lost much of his liveliness. His spirit had been clouded by a sort of an eclipse. But nobody knew why, for neither the housewife nor her husband

revealed the secret of the "deaf woman" grinding maize. One day the housewife sent a message to the schoolmaster desiring him to repeat the visit. The boy conveyed the message but now the teacher felt no excitement. All that he said was, "Ask her if she has consumed the flour ground previously."

The Opium Smokers

SEVERAL opium smokers were once seated in their den. It occurred to one of them that for a long time they had not had an outing and they decided to go to the Shalimar gardens the next Sunday. Those days the boat was the only means of conveyance suited to those going to the gardens on pleasure trips and the small fraternity of opium smokers decided to go to the riverside wherefrom they could be transported across the Dal Lake. They carried with them their rations and some utensils to cook their meals. It was rather too early in the morning for any one to be transported over the Dal and the opium smokers had to wait on the river bank for some time. The early morning breeze was blowing and the friends felt cold. So they decided upon enjoying a smoke and the pipe was filled with tobacco and opium and each of them enjoyed the luxury of a puff.

Not long after one of them shouted: "There you are! A boat is coming."

"Let us make ready," said another.

A third shouted, "Friends, you are aware, I am always the first to step into a boat."

The next was eager to contest this assumed right of his companion. There were arguments and appeals while the first opium smoker shouted, "You accursed boatwoman! Why don't you make for this bank?"

"But where is she ?" asked one of them who appeared to be comparatively sober.

The first smoker picked up a pebble and saying, "Let this crush her silly head", hurled it at what he imagined to be a boatwoman plying a boat but what was in reality

a fly sitting on a stalk of dried paddy grass. The pebble splashed into the water and the fly was frightened away. "There! there!" said he, "the stone has done away with that dirty woman and the boat is about to capsize."

After some time they managed to get a boatman to take them across the lake to the Mughal gardens at the foot of the hills flanking Srinagar on the east. The *shikara*, as the light boat used for such pleasure trips over short distances is called, is a comfortable means of conveyance and one sits in it perfectly at ease as in one's home. Such an attitude develops the mood for smoking one's favourite pipe and, having taken a day off, the fraternity of smokers amply fumigated their interior with opium, as amply as only the divines do. Consequently the stars became visible to their naked eyes, and the nymphs under water and the spirits of the air entertained them with their minstrelsy.

In this atmosphere surcharged with gaiety one of them felt a little heaviness in his throat and spat out into the water. A shriek escaped the throat of another. "Oh!" he cried, "our friend has spat his heart out." There was genuine concern among all of them for their companion who spat into the water and even he came to believe that he must have thrown away his heart. They laid him down, rubbed the soles of his feet, fanned his face and heaved long drawn-out sighs till the influence of opium lifted off his brain.

He sat up and consoled his friends: "Don't grieve yourselves to death, brethren," he said, "my heart, nay, not even my whole life is worth all the grieving. May I be your sacrifice! Take comfort and be at peace."

They ultimately crossed the Dal Lake and the boat landed. They picked up their things from the boat, utensils, rations, sheets, pillows, etc., and the queen of them all, the smoking apparatus. It was decided that they should cook their meals outside the garden and make a repast of it on the flower-bestrewn lawns of the

garden under a chinar by the fountains and cascades.

The first step decided upon was to prepare tea and to sip it leaning against the trunks of trees with their branches outspread. While tea-leaves were being heated in the *somavar*, a mulberry dropped from above and perched on the lip of the opium smoker who lay stretched on the ground under the mulberry tree. They watched him rather enviously and expected him to open his lips and eat the fruit. But he did no such thing and the mulberry lay glued to the spot where it had fallen.

One of his companions could not resist saying, "Look, a mulberry is fallen on your lips. If I were you I would open my lips and swallow it."

The other replied, "It is all very well for you to advise me to open my lips. But do you take it to be so easy a job to move the heavy gates leading to the stomach and eat the mulberry. If I were as young in years as you, as once I was, I could do so. But now it is too exacting a job."

In the meantime the mulberry had slipped into the mouth and the man quite enjoyed its taste.

Duties about the preparation of their meals were allotted but it was decided to do everything without speaking a single word. Whoever broke this golden rule of silence was to stand the others a course of *pilau*. Consequently all of them set about discharging their duties in absolute silence. One of them improvised an oven, another ignited fire while a third put the pots on the oven. Not a word was spoken. At length the rice boiled and gruel had to be drained off. In Kashmir, pots used for cooking rice are wider at the bottom with a neck which is narrower and about one-third of the size of the pot. The lid was put in place, a duster was tied round the mouth and the pot was lifted to the edge of the water wherein it was intended to let the excess of gruel drip.

As the man did all this quietly, his glance turned in the direction of water where he saw the reflection of the pot.

Wider at the bottom and narrow at the mouth with a duster tied round, it had a distant resemblance to a female form in the seated posture as viewed through the befogged eye of an opium smoker and with a feeling of mild surprise he remarked, "Hast thou come too?" He meant, of course, his wife in the characteristic Kashmiri headgear. His companions who were eager for a break in the spell of silence did not ask him how his wife had come but seized the opportunity and shouted, "He will stand us a course of *pilau*." A good deal of hilarity followed.

They spent their time in the garden, lolling on the lawns. They did justice to the rations they had carried but more so they smoked to their heart's delight. While one of them was nodding drowsily after a heavy meal, a fly sat on his eyelid without his being aware of it. A companion of his took it for no less dreadful a being than an eagle out to pick his eyes out. Eager to save the nodding friend from harm he picked up one of the shoes and shot it at the dangerous enemy perched on the tender organ of the man who was nodding. The latter felt dazed and sparks flew out of his head but was congratulated by the other: "I have saved you from inevitable ruin."

The sky was bright and blue and no one amongst them was eager to go back home. The sun flushed the west and peeped from the placid lake. Flocks of crows, starlings and sparrows flew across the sky, lured by the blooming west. Before long the moon emerged from behind the Nishat garden and in course of time everything was painted silver. Every vagrant thought of his lair and even the opium smokers decided upon going home.

No boat was visible in the direction in which they went. But it was silver, silver everywhere and who would need a boat in such an atmosphere! When they reached near the edge of the water, only one of them doubted that it was not a continuation of land. The others had no such doubt and to reassure him that what they said was correct they lifted the thin skull cap off his head and

hurled it on the water ahead of them. The skull cap, of course, floated on water which convinced the other that they were equally safe. Two of them led the van and in a few moments they found themselves steeped in water, especially the one loaded with pots. But the cold douche washed the vapours of opium off their heads and they promptly retraced their steps and saved themselves but could not salvage the pots!

The 'Drone'

MOST housewives have a general grievance against their husbands that while they are overworked, the bread-winning husband lives a life of ease and comfort. That, at any rate, was the feeling of the housewife who played the leading role in this tale. It is difficult to say how far her lot was heavier than that of other women of her class living in the town, but there is no doubt that her husband had much less to exert than other men. He was a man without a vocation. When other men went every morning to their offices, shops or places of business to earn their daily bread, this man would be found lolling on a worn-out carpet reading a romantic tale, reclining against his soiled pillow with the pipe of his smoking apparatus in his mouth, or playing dice with men of his like. The housewife, on the other hand, had a ceaseless routine of physical labour, brooming floors, scrubbing utensils, cooking meals, washing clothes, husking paddy, looking after children and what not. She hardly ever got respite from these tasks. Little wonder, therefore, that she complained to her husband of her hard lot and called him a drone.

As a matter of fact that epithet nearly suited his calling. He was an absentee landlord. One of his energetic and ambitious ancestors had somehow been able to acquire a good deal of farm land which had brought to the family wealth, social status and a name. The present head of the family inherited neither the energy nor the ambition of his great ancestor, but a portion of the ancestral land did come to him inevitably, and the tenants of his lands delivered into his hands every year

corn enough to keep his body and soul together. He was convinced that God had created the ancestor to free him from the crushing necessity of working for his living. He blessed his soul and thanked the tenants for sparing him any pains or efforts in looking after the lands.

Not that he was good for nothing. Being the scion of a land-owning family he neither had the inclination nor the necessity to go in for the profession of an artisan, a petty wage-earner. It would compromise the social status and reputation of his family and his relations. Shopkeeping, the profession of a petty retail-seller went against his grain as one's success depended upon using a false balance or weights. He had once succeeded in seeking state employment as a petty clerk but it involved his being posted at a distant place against which, even if he were prepared, his wife protested. He had, therefore, to forego the appointment. Eventually he came to be a gentleman at large. Even so, he had provided everything to his family. All their needs were satisfied and he was considered a well-to-do man independent of the vagaries of the weather and commerce which dogged most wage-earners who were either artisans or shopkeepers.

What his wife grumbled of was something quite different. In the first instance she was rather jealous of her husband's life which implied absence of toil and his independence. While every other bread-winner had to look up to his boss or employer or even clients, her husband was perhaps the only person not bossed-over ordinarily. She would have been happy indeed if she could share part of this independence, but that was, of course, impossible. On the other hand, she had more than her share of domestic toil. Some of her neighbours were not so well off but they enjoyed other amenities. One of them who was working under the public administration in a humble capacity was frequently approached by people for favours and they offered him presents in kind like woollen blankets, quantities of oil and clarified butter, cases of

fruit or finer qualities of rice. A gift for which no monetary or material price has to be paid is craved by most people and this housewife always heaved a sigh wistfully whenever her neighbour sent her a pound of pulses, by way of sharing the presents, with the usual: "You might fancy a dish of pulses. Somebody presented it to my husband." "Nobody makes a present of anything to my drone," she would say to herself and involuntarily nurse a grudge against her husband for her frustration and inferiority complex.

Some other neighbours of her's enjoyed other privileges at the expense of the public administration and they boasted of it. This housewife could never boast of anything of this sort which could add an ell to her social prestige. No doubt, they enjoyed a unique status in that her husband had not to acknowledge anyone as his boss, but in a society where everybody was bossed-over nobody regarded it as an advantage. So the housewife felt frustrated and depressed and gave frequently a demonstration of it to her husband.

Not infrequently did she call him a drone in a voice audible to him and gave expression to her frustration on this account, comparing her "hard" lot with that of her privileged neighbours. Often he took no notice of these darts of her tongue which were sharp and piercing, but sometimes his patience was exhausted and he protested. But that only added fuel to the fire and gave spurs to the barbed tongue of the housewife. The house was then turned into a camp of belligerents. Charges and countercharges were hurled not only on those alive but on the ancestors to several generations on each side and, of course, several skeletons in each cupboard were exposed. Sometimes it led to blows, but when that was not so, the housewife rattled doors and windows violently and severely beat up her children. That was the last straw and beyond that he showed the white feather. He felt crushed and this put a sharper edge on the tongue of the

housewife which never showed signs of weariness or flagging. But by that time a neighbour or two arrived on the scene, hostilities were formally ended for the time being and an armed truce patched up.

The days following such outbursts showed the parties at the lowest point of morale. They appeared to be physically exhausted. They did not relinquish their respective duties, but each appeared to dread the very shadow of the other. The housewife frequently heaved a deep sigh and referred to her good-for-nothing husband. "Look," she would say, "how the others flourish. They work hard and provide comfort to their wives. My man squats all the time. I am on my legs nearly the whole day and yet he has the heart to abuse me. But for the children I would have given him up long back and I would have been rather living as a maid-servant in my brother's house than as a housewife in this wretched hole."

On his own part the husband was not to be caught napping. He ventilated his mind thus, "Oh ! the evil day when I was yoked to this witch ! She has eaten my very life out of me." And cautiously he would ask the second person to close the window lest his wife got wind of what he said. "Do you think I am afraid of her tantrums? Not the least. I am more than a match for her, only I do not like to come down to her level. And think of it ! She threatens to desert me ! Would that she conferred that good fortune on me ! It would be a jolly good riddance. But it is an empty boast; I know it is. . . ."

In spite of the timely precaution the wife heard the words. She felt provoked and left the house under formal intimation to the husband. No sooner did he get the intimation than he was in jitters. Out he rushed, offered a thousand apologies and touched her feet. He felt completely demoralized. She pretended not to heed his entreaties. Once again the neighbours intervened and begged of her on his behalf and on behalf of her children not to leave her house. Then only was she moved to

retrace her steps and consented to enter her home. He was haunted by a dread and his nerves were all tense till she once again resumed her domestic duties.

Gradually tension was allayed and they settled down to a quiet life till there was another outburst. On the sly the husband made the empty boast to his relatives or friends, "Don't be mistaken that I am afraid of her tantrums. I am only being generous."

Such outbursts occurred once almost every year and the various scenes and acts of this drama were well-known in the neighbourhood. Sometimes the neighbours even enacted this drama privately by way of entertaining one another.

One day, an old uncle of the husband in whom he confided gave him advice which he seemed to fancy. He made it clear to him that he embodied all the characteristics of what the ancients called a "hen-pecked" husband. "But," he told him, "you need not be so for ever. A man was afraid of his shadow and ran away. The shadow only pursued him and dogged his steps. But then the man turned round and lo ! the shadow was verily at his mercy."

It appeared to the husband to be a very sound piece of advice and he decided to act up to it to the last letter. In fact the likelihood of his turning the tables on his wife developed in him an arrogance which led to another domestic crisis. The uncle was no longer at hand to advise him on all details and he had to depend upon his own wits to tide over the crisis with flying colours. He framed his plan and chalked out his strategy: "Before she steps out I must seize a pretext and leave the house in a pet under the pretension of never coming back to the fold."

As the head of the family he laboured under the delusion that the house could not exist for five minutes without him and that he was indispensable. He expected that the moment he threatened to leave the house his wife would supplicate to him not to forsake her, not to leave her to the winds.

So when a domestic crisis came next he gave an ultimatum that he was going to leave the family for good. He expected immediate but favourable reaction. There was none. "She doesn't believe that I could ever be so callous as to leave her," he thought. "To make my victory undisputed let me assure her that I am quite capable of it.... Let me turn round upon the shadow." He actually put on his shoes with the conviction that before he came to the foot of the staircase his wife would prostrate herself before him. He descended the steps one after another but not a whiff of air was heard, nor a mouse stirred. He actually slowed his movement to give time to his wife to come and throw herself at his feet. In spite of this firm belief that this strategy of his would utterly deflate the enemy, there was no sign of the wife taking the same line of thought. Reluctantly he stepped into the lane. "Now she will come to her senses," he imagined. "She will beat her breast and tear her hair," he fancied. "Let her do so for a while," he loved to think.

The lane led to a road, the main thoroughfare of the town with numerous shops. The husband was even now convinced that before he would reach the road he would be persuaded to come back and bless the family with his presence. He even imagined the words he would hear, "Promise me, my lord, that you will never forsake us. . . ." However, his progress towards the thoroughfare continued and nothing happened. He proceeded further and yet nobody called him. He was highly embarrassed and did not know how to meet the situation. At last he decided to sit on a shop-front. The shopkeeper was known to him and he thought it a good change to spend some time in the company of the shopman.

Minutes passed and formed an hour and yet nobody approached him to excuse his wife. The hour grew into two and every minute of this period was full of tension for him. He seemed to get an apprehension that his strategy had miscarried. "May be," his hope revived, "she is in my

search but does not know that I am here." Soon he managed to convey the intelligence of his position to his wife through a passerby and added, "Don't tell her I told you to do so." This passing hope sustained his spirit for sometime. But how long could it be? When he had been sitting on the shop-front for almost three hours, his eyes met a sight for which he would have paid a hundred pre-war rupees. He saw his wife actually stepping out on the road. What more convincing proof was needed of the success of his plan? Had he not succeeded in making the "shadow" turn round and had she not come out in her anxiety to persuade him to return?

She had looked in his direction, had seen him and it appeared to him, had even looked at him with a feeling of relief. Then she turned in the opposite direction. He watched her with baited breath. "Perhaps she has not seen me seated here," he thought, "let me allay her fears and meet her half-way in her predicament," and involuntarily he shouted, "Are you looking for me? I am sitting here." She did not even turn round in the direction of the voice. She purchased milk, cream and cakes from a neighbouring shop and went back without heeding what he said.

This was an experience never even dreamt of by him. He felt defeated and he had exposed his weakness to several people including the shopman. He did not know how to face the situation. "Women are callous," he came to think. At last he went to his house with heavy feet and a heart in trepidation. He opened the door and tried to make peace with his wife. All that she said was, "Being fit for nothing outside, the brazen-faced has come back," and he quietly pocketed it.

Telltale Narration

As a lawyer's clerk in a district town he came into contact with all sorts of people: big landholders and petty tenants, shopkeepers and businessmen, judicial officers and public men, and he knew practically all their innermost secrets. It pleased him to relate to those who collected in his study at home, anecdotes about men and their affairs which he learnt in his professional capacity. Of course, he never mentioned names but his narratives were all the more interesting in spite of that because he was an unconscious artist in story-telling. But he was at his best when he related a story of his own creation. In that process the limitations of the three dimensional world ceased to stand in his way and time and space could dissolve at his bidding. He was a child, pure and simple, and was so absorbed in the child's play of his fancy that people really envied him. While he was narrating a tale, usually with himself as the central figure, scepticism disappeared.

It was not easy to provoke him to start his pet hare. But one Sunday when he was at perfect leisure he was in a favourable state of mind to regale his friends with "laughter holding both his sides." He would be drawn out by a simple statement made deliberately but with all innocence.

"Saw——son of——the other day. Though so young, he was galloping with the speed of wind." This would come almost as a red rag to the bull and the lawyer's clerk would not stand it. "Tush, tush!" he would say, "don't talk in hyperboles. I can know a good horseman from bad. Must I tell you what it is to gallop with the speed

of wind? Listen." The child set about building castles in the air.

"Many years ago when I was a younger man, my boy attended the school. The teacher introduced a new book and asked the boys to do certain sums from it. The boy asked me to get him the book but it was not available locally. I said I would go to Srinagar and get it. I was extremely busy and could not keep my promise. Then one morning the boy came to me at about eight and began sobbing, 'The teacher will beat me black and blue if I don't show him the sums.' I could stand his sobbing no longer. My pony was saddled in a moment and off I galloped in the direction of Srinagar. Towns and villages flitted by in a few moments and I was duly in Srinagar. At Amirakadal I met an old friend with whom I talked for a couple of minutes and shared a cigarette. Getting the book from the book-seller I galloped on my return without wasting time anywhere. Back here I gave the boy his book. You may be sure that he did the sums and trotted to his school in time. His teacher was highly pleased with him for he was the only boy to have got the book and done the sums."

Being gay in mood and light in spirit the hero took his associates into confidence and related another adventure.

"I had gone to a village in the foot hills. Dense and dark forests abound in the vicinity. One night we heard an unusual sound. It was the whining of the fox. In that part of the country it is an alarming signal, for it means that the leopard is stalking in its wake. Sure as anything there was a panic as cottage after village cottage shouted that the cattle were in danger. Before they could take all measures about the safety of their cattle, the wild beast had already claimed one or two victims. The household where I was staying was still fumbling and hesitant about the steps to be taken to safeguard their cattle. But the royal beast was on the spot.

They were too late. Many of them were funky. They cried or shouted. It was a strange spectacle of spinelessness.

"I was perhaps the only one who was not unnerved. I foresaw that the cattleshed would come in for the special attention of the beast. I took my position near the entrance to the shed, the trunk of a tree providing me cover. The leopard was in the attempt of pushing open the door of the shed when I sprang up from behind my cover, was astride its back and grasped its ears even before it was aware of what had happened. I twisted, tweaked and twitched its ears with such vigour that it turned its head away from the shed even as the elephant responds to the spike of the mahout. The leopard was soon turned into a cousin of the lamb. The onlookers who were taken by surprise came rushing with ropes and chains. A halter was put round the jaws and head of the leopard, its legs were bound in chains and ultimately the leopard became an inmate of the zoo in Srinagar."

But another exploit of the man beats all else in its originality and boldness of conception. In handling this theme all accepted conventions, scientific laws and propriety have been thrown to the winds. Here is the narrative in brief.

"I was strolling along the road early one morning when I saw a car coming in the distance. In a minute or so I realized that it was the Maharaja's car and when it came close to me, sure enough it stopped. Even before I could salute the Maharaja he had recognized me and asked the chauffeur to apply the brake. He betokened me to get in and the car ran once again at full speed. We talked informally as usual and I learnt that the Maharaja was being awaited by several friends in his favourite game-preserve. He invited me to keep him company in a bear hunt. I gave my assent.

"I had never handled a rifle so far but I had confidence in my ability to pick up the fundamentals of the art the

moment I was confronted with the situation. When we reached the shooting lodge I at once grasped a rifle without in the least betraying my ignorance which the Maharaja never suspected. The *shikaris* had already chalked out the plans for us. We went deeper into the forest, and were surrounded by lofty grass and undergrowth. Various members of the party went in different directions but I kept close to the Maharaja. In an hour or so we detected traces of bears and before we could really expect them they were already upon us. The beaters, the *shikaris*, the aides and the Maharaja all got into frantic activity. They took position under cover and some of them betrayed nervousness. At last the Maharaja fired. The bullet missed the aim, for by that time the two bears had shifted their positions. The *shikaris* and the aides were excited now because of the concern they felt for the Maharaja. I felt that unless I took a careful aim, the situation might get out of hand. Taking cover behind a stone I fired in the name of the Almighty. Two bullets whizzed at once out of the double-barrel gun. For some distance the twin bullets kept pace together. Getting close to the bears the two bullets bifurcated and penetrated the hearts of the two bears. In a few moments the bears collapsed even before my eyes and I emerged as a hunter. 'Thank you,' said the Maharaja. 'Glory be to your Highness,' I replied..."

* * *

The headman was an institution of hoary antiquity in the Indian village set-up. He commanded high prestige in the village and he was the liaison between the administration and the people. His duties included communication of intelligence of an extraordinary nature and realization of land tax.

Because the headman served as a liaison and enjoyed the support of the administration he commanded obedience

from the common people. Nobody dared disobey him and sometimes when he merely raised his eyebrows it was taken as an admonition by the simpler among the villagers. But it was not always roses. Occasionally he found it difficult to realize land revenue from the villagers and then the *tehsildar* took him to task. If he was haughty and vain he usually made an example of the headman. Indignities were loaded upon him.

Once upon a time the *tehsildar* called the headman of a village to the headquarters. In Kashmir the State also undertook to supply rations in paddy to the citizens of Srinagar at fixed rates. For this purpose it imposed upon the cultivators a levy in grains which the *tehsildar* and finally the headman collected from them. That year resulted in a drought and the people of the city became panicky owing to the poor harvest. They raised a hue and cry and the State administration, fearing the British Resident, set its machinery into motion to collect the levy. To allay the panic *tehsildars* were directed to collect the levy much ahead of the usual schedule.

At the *tehsil* headquarters the village headman represented the difficulties of the cultivators. Their harvest was poor and they could not part with the grains because they were afraid their own families would starve. They looked to the State to come to their aid in that lean period. All these were common grievances but the headman of the village above referred to was the first to ventilate them. Other headmen who had also been summoned endorsed these views and the *tehsildar* felt himself landed in a mess. But he was bold and sagacious. He did not want to punish everybody. He decided to make an example of the first headman and thus to overawe everyone else. He had the turban taken off the headman and dismantled. Under his orders the headman was caned and finally he was dragged by the feet on the earth for nearly twenty yards. These usual weapons in the armoury of petty administrators overawed the headmen.

The headman who had thus been subjected to these grave indignities left for his village. The news of the rough treatment he had received had already reached the village and the villagers were touched by the stout courage with which he had stood for their point of view. Many of them came to him to express their sympathy with him. The gathering was tense with a good deal of resentment against the *tehsildar*. But the headman had not lost his sense of humour. When one of his sympathizers said, "We are grieved to learn, sir, that the inhuman *tehsildar* put you to indignity," he replied:

"Indignity! indignity to the devil. Not the least of it."

"Respected sir," said another, "we are shocked to learn that your turban was demolished."

"Utterly incorrect. Who told you it was so? Do you think I would leave them alive? It was only a turn or two of the turban that they undid."

The villagers were surprised at this complacence on the part of the headman. Another man put the next question to him.

"Is it a fact, sir, that they caned you?"

"Caned!" replied the headman. "Who the devil? What rumours some people spread and others believe! They no more could cane me than count the stars in the day. All that happened was that I received just one or two lashes and they were as light as the touch of flowers."

"Mr. headman, did they drag you by the feet on the earth?"

"Not at all, not at all. Dragging me by the feet! Think of it. Not even their grandfathers could dare to do so. Do you take your headman to be so cheap? It was only over two or three yards that I was made to slip!"

The dense clouds of tension had already lifted and now the whole company burst into laughter. "By God," said the villagers to the headman, "you are a rare gem."

Mahadev

ONCE while Mahadev was sitting amongst his friends who belonged to the same trade as he, the conversation centered on the peculiarities of dress among different people. The Kashmiris never weary of the loose tunic *pherans* which keep them warm. The people of Jammu, both men and women, have preferred for ages trousers fitting very tight on their legs. These trousers are pretty long and the wrinkles can be made to add grace and give an artistic appearance to the wearer's legs.

The degree of tightness of the trousers was being discussed with some amount of earnestness when somebody hazarded the opinion that no pickpocket could steal a valuable if hidden inside trousers of this kind. Though the general opinion was more or less favourable to such a view, Mahadev's vanity was hurt and he desired the remark to be qualified with an exception in his favour. The company was not prepared to concede it, and thereby provoked Mahadev to contest it hotly.

"The test of your ability, Mahadev," said a veteran comrade, "to pull a thing out of one of the wrinkles of the trousers lies in your hand reaching the object without the wearer being aware of it. Do you say it is possible?"

"Why not?" retorted Mahadev.

The company laughed, and but for his reputation would have ridiculed Mahadev for subscribing to such a view. Mahadev, however, was not put out. He put forth a new theory: "If your hand can't reach the object, what prevents you from pulling the trousers out quietly?"

This was regarded to be equally absurd, considering that the garment is close to the leg almost as another

layer of skin. Mahadev was challenged to demonstrate it, for nothing short of that could satisfy his comrades. The test of the operation lay in accomplishing it quietly without disturbing the man wearing it.

"You may, for ought we know, draw it out of a man at the point of the knife," said his comrades.

"How could such a possibility be obviated?" Yes, it flashed across somebody's mind: the ruler himself wore such trousers.

"Mahadev, you will have to prove it by pulling the trousers out of the legs of no less a person than His Highness himself," said they.

Mahadev agreed.

"And the wager?"

"I'll surrender my leadership, shave off my moustaches and pick up a new trade."

They accepted.

Anecdotes of thieves breaking into the palace of a ruling sovereign, though rather rare, are not entirely unheard of; but there is perhaps no instance of a ruler being deprived of his trousers while asleep. It was an impossible task that Mahadev had undertaken; at least some of his comrades felt so and they were looking forward to the day when Mahadev would surrender his leadership on oath and expose himself to the banter of his comrades on the loss of his moustaches. Was it a joke to enter into the bedroom of His Highness while all the guards were alert with their rifles and their bayonets? According to the proverb, even birds are afraid to fly over the residence of a ruler, and who was Mahadev, after all?

Probably even Mahadev himself had no idea of the gravity of the task he had volunteered to accomplish, for he found no key to the problem for several weeks. He eagerly pursued the task as an intellectual rather than a physical problem. His task was particularly difficult because the whole retinue of His Highness consisted of his own clansmen of Jammu and others had no access

to his private chambers. Mahadev was found by his comrades frequenting the surroundings of the palatial residence of the ruler and they would exchange a significant wink as much as to say, "where are you with your boasts?"

There was a long and narrow street which led to one of the palace entrances. Guards and other retainers of the ruler who lived in the servants' quarters of the palace usually passed along this street to and fro, and a few shops had been set up there to meet their requirements. When off their duty, these retainers would usually come to these shops in business, have long-drawn pulls at the *narela* or the bigger *hubble bubble*, give their teeth exercise with gram coated with jaggery and exchange gossip. Among these was a class of servants engaged for massaging the body of His Highness, and gently pressing his limbs before he went to sleep.

Members of the unofficial guild to which Mahadev belonged possess sharp intelligence, quick judgement and a well-developed faculty to win the sympathies of most people. By cultivating these retainers on these shops Mahadev stored his sharp mind with the usual trend of events inside the palace: the time His Highness ate or slept or enjoyed the company of his friends; what upset his temper or what humoured him; how he spent his day and his night. He carried a small *narela* and a pouch of tobacco, and the offer of a pull at its tube would easily draw out of these simple hill people their knowledge of the palace.

The ruler was devoted to his faith in the orthodox fashion. It was soon given out that he was proceeding to the shrine called Khir Bhawani so well-known in Kashmir. This shrine was situated on the bank of a tributary of the river Sindh which joined the Jhelum at Shadipur, twelve miles below Srinagar. His Highness' camp moved to the shrine by houseboats, *doongas*, etc. He freely gave in charity on this occasion and fed every one who came to his kitchen. Having observed a fast

and offered worship on the due date, i.e., the eighth day of the bright fortnight of Jeth, and having exercised his charity to his heart's content, His Highness proceeded down the Sindh towards Srinagar. However, it was usual with him to camp at Shadipur for a few days on his return, and on the occasion to which the story refers, he did not let slip this opportunity for enjoying a little respite from his strenuous duties in the capital.

Mahadev was equally unstinting in showing himself off as a devout follower of his faith and people said that though his means of earning his livelihood were despicable, he seemed to have the heart of a devotee. He fasted on the eighth day at the shrine of Khir Bhawani and even served pudding, milk and fruit to the hungry, and this made something of a stir at the sacred spot. He greeted his acquaintances among His Highness' staff with a smiling face.

The next day his boat also halted at Shadipur. The vast State camping ground was covered with many tents pitched for His Highness over whom the majestic chinars stood guard. The ruler here renewed his acquaintance with many of his subjects of this region who came to pay their respects to him and honoured many others by asking their names and other particulars. His subjects were surprised at his sharp memory, for he remembered the names of many of them and, in several cases, of their fathers too. Of course, there were perfect police arrangements, but he was rather friendly, unassuming and merciful, and his camp never developed the "hush-hush" atmosphere. He gave large sums by way of charity and *bakhshees*.

Mahadev felt at home among the retainers of the ruler and even he came to the camp to offer his respects. He invited one of them to his boat where meat dishes were cooked, the ruler being a strict vegetarian. The man ate to his heart's content.

It was the duty of this man on this particular day to massage His Highness' limbs and lull him to sleep. Mahadev secured a set of the garments worn by the retainers with a turban dyed in bright yellow saffron colour. Boldly and cleverly Mahadev managed to slip past the sentries in the disguise of a retainer and got into His Highness' tent when the latter was already dozing. He began to press his limbs so tenderly that the ruler did not feel any difference in the hands or their movements. He was soon fast asleep.

The servant whose place Mahadev had taken had had a full repast with his friends. To avoid the envy of his comrades he had kept the invitation and its consummation a secret. But soon his mind became deliciously befogged and before he was aware of it, he fell sound asleep. As no need of his service was felt by His Highness, he continued in the earthly abode of bliss for several hours.

Meanwhile, Mahadev made sure that His Highness was fast asleep and that nobody had suspected his presence there. He quietly unpacked a small piece of a wooden tube and directing one end towards the ankles of the august sleeper, one by one, gently blew into it. Several ants who lay imprisoned inside the tube found a welcome release into the tight fitting trousers of the ruler and gradually made their way into the warm interior. They ran up and down the legs, and who can sleep so sound as not to be disturbed and irritated by such movements? "Damn these misbegotten insects", said the ruler scratching his legs with his toes, "pull out the trousers".

Mahadev, his life in his hands, was waiting for this golden moment. Smoothly and artfully he pulled the trousers off His Highness' legs. The august sleeper was once again soothed and lulled to deep sleep. Being reassured of his safety, Mahadev slipped out with the prize. His Highness changed clothes every day. The servant who

had fallen asleep marked the absence of the trousers but did not report the matter to the high-ups lest his absence from duty be brought to light.

Mahadev went triumphantly to his comrades with the prize. His Highness' trousers were identified, and the outstanding leadership of Mahadev was re-affirmed.

Snippets

THE boat was formerly the most convenient means of transport in Kashmir. Once a large family of priests was proceeding in a boat to a holy shrine at a village on the river bank. The boatmen use the paddle, the punt and the rope in propelling the boat over long distances. The boatman and the boatwomàn take their turns at the stern and both of them are equally skilled in steering. The one who propels the boat from the bow with either the punt or the paddle carefully observes the depth of water underneath and wishing to avoid reefs, shoals or sandbanks warns the steerer to push off or close, to steer right or left.

On this occasion the bowman wanting to avoid shallow water shouted to his wife at the stern to steer to the right. The word "right" in Kashmir has the same sound as the word for an offering of monetary gift to priests after a religious ritual. The word is coveted by priests as much as a "brief" is by a lawyer. The priests in the boat had, therefore, a feeling that somebody was offering money to them and involuntarily they rushed to the bow in a body. The equilibrium of the boat was upset and it capsized.

* * *

A priest and his son were seated side by side on the occasion of a thanksgiving dinner in the house of a layman to which they were invited. Choice dishes were in front of them and they relished the fare highly. While they were having dinner the son felt thirsty and drank

water. The father looked at him ferociously and nudged him with his elbow. The son felt that he had been guilty of some breach of etiquette. When both of them reached home, with great humility the son asked the father where he had been guilty of a breach of etiquette. The latter was once again infuriated and gave his son several blows. This seemed to take the edge off his fury and he advised his son that when a member of the priestly class is invited to dinner by the laity, he should not drench himself with water but take as much of the delicious viands as he can. "Water, is always available at my home but good dishes, sonny, are not in our destiny."

The son realizing the point of his father's advice, rejoined, "But father, if we take a little water it whets our appetite and increases our capacity to take more food. When we take our meals at home we should not take water along, but when we dine out it is in our own interest to take a little water in between morsels."

The father once more lost his temper. He pounced upon his son and gave him a few more blows. The son was in utter confusion till the father added, "Why did you not tell me so earlier. I could have done greater justice to the meal."

* * *

One day a man called upon a priest. The latter was sitting in his study. The visitor submitted his problem to the priest for his verdict: "Two neighbours own an ox each. One of the animals kills the other. Should the owner of the ox killed be entitled to compensation from the owner of the surviving ox?" The priest pondered over the matter, analyzed all its facts and came to the conclusion that his visitor was obviously the master of the ox possessed of greater animality and bellicosity. But he wanted to be cocksure and asked the visitor his profession.

"I am an oilman, sir," replied the other.

"There you are," said the priest to himself, "his ox had too much of oilcake, hence his extraordinary hitting power."

Now he was as sure of the case as he could be and pronounced his verdict: "A very foul offence has been committed by the oilman's ox grown overweeningly fat on oilcake. The owner should offer the victim an ox for the killed besides an indemnity of ten rupees."

"Worthy sir," said the oilman, "your ox has killed my ox. May I request you to compensate me?"

"Is that so? Let me make sure of the law that has been laid down precisely for such an offence," replied the other. He began to turn the pages of a book and pour over them. His face was once again invested with self confidence and he declared, "The particular ox had come to the end of the span of its existence and was bound to meet death anyhow. Death, like life, is in the hands of the Almighty. The other ox was only the instrument of Destiny. No compensation is indicated or justifiable."

* * *

A householder once invited his family priest to his house to supervise the recitation of prayers. Ordinarily the householder never bothered himself about such functions and even earned some notoriety by calling it a waste of time and money. But on this occasion he was persuaded by his womenfolk to suffer himself to go through the ordeal of this ceremony because his son had been ailing for a pretty long time and the physicians had not been able to bring him round despite their best efforts.

The priest was a shrewd man and was convinced that the householder could not have approached him but for some dire necessity. He was, however, glad that the scoffer had come to pray. When the religious ceremony was over, the invitees were served a meal and the priest

was happy enough at this increase in his clientele. At the end of the function the householder was expected to present a monetary gift to the priest by way of his "fee" before wishing him goodbye and the gift offered was insignificantly smaller than the priest expected even from a man of heterodox practices like his host. The priest objected, and to it the householder replied, "This is more than enough for a priest for reciting a few verses."

The priest realized that the householder had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. He wanted to bring home to him that he could hit back and even at the risk of using language which he considered impolite and vulgar he replied, "Yes, this is enough, more so because the priest led the service without making ablutions befittingly."

* * *

Several hundred years ago a holy man lived in Kashmir. He is credited with having performed many miracles and a large number of people frequently surrounded him. He did not live a retired life like anchorites but performed all the duties as a citizen and householder. He was gifted with scholarship and wit and commanded considerable influence with the people.

The State makes a handmaiden of the Church wherever it can. It tries to control the thought processes of the people by all means at its disposal even by winning over and cleverly brainwashing influential leaders whether religious or secular. A nobleman sought to win over this holy man and cultivated his friendship. This was perhaps to serve as a weapon in his armoury for feathering his own nest and the holy man who understood the subtle plan did not apparently discourage him. In course of time the nobleman gained some popularity on account of his association with the holy man. To command greater stature in the eyes of the people he once invited

the holy man to dinner at his own residence and, surprisingly enough, the latter agreed. He knew that his friendship was being sought to serve the nobleman as a handle and not for love or holiness.

The holy man proceeded to the nobleman's house on the particular day. The doorkeeper was familiar with the associates and guests of the nobleman who arrived in proper attire. They wore starched turbans, precious shawls, golden ornaments and embroidered footwear. They were attended by servants or equerries. As a complete contrast here was this beggar in a skull-cap, an all too short *pheran* with sleeves exposing his forearms. How could he claim the honour of the dinner-table along with other august company?

"Begone, sirrah, or you will receive a kick on your hip. Your sleeves cannot cover your elbows and yet you claim to be a guest in this house" they told him. Several guests were witness to this incident but they had no inclination to interfere.

Soon after the holy man returned. His beard was well-combed, his turban high, his *pheran* was starch-white and his sleeves were long enough to reach his knees in keeping with the fashion. He wore rings and a fine shawl. He was saluted by the doorkeeper as he passed into the hall where he was given the seat meant for the chief guest. Dinner was served and everybody was looking to the chief guest to say grace.

The chief guest, however, did no such thing. He produced his sleeves and said, "Sleeves eat, do justice to the dinner." Everybody was surprised, but the holy man repeated the address to the sleeves. The host felt embarrassed and begged him to excuse any lapse on his part. The holy man explained what had happened adding that only his dress, his sleeves, deserved the honour of the dinner. The nobleman wanted to chastize the doorkeeper to satisfy the guest but the latter forbade it saying that the servant was not the chief sinner in the house.

The lesson went home to the nobleman and the holy man left without touching the food.

* * *

Before germicides and disinfectants were known, the number of people suffering from fungi of the hair, scabies or excessive scruff was large enough. Their number was larger in a cold country like Kashmir. Such people did not enjoy growth of hair on the head and felt embarrassed in company. They never uncovered their heads for fear of earning the appellation "copper" which, with reference to the context, applied to the head covered with scabies or excessive scruff.

Once there was a man with a so-called "copper" head. He had many friends and enjoyed their company but was extremely sensitive to a reference to hair. He would blush and expose his intense embarrassment. His friends wanted to cure him of it but did not succeed. "Once he uncovers his head," they said, "he will gradually get over that maidenly shyness. But how to get him lift his turban?"

They framed a plan. The "copper"-head was extremely fond of indoor games like chess and dice. One day, while he was busy playing, one of his friends quietly placed on his turban a live-coal. The live-coal burnt several folds of his turban from which wisps of smoke rose. His friends knew everything about it and expected him to throw off his turban in alarm and thus expose his head. But the "copper"-head was not easily perturbed. He sensed the mischief and quietly left the room to remove his turban in the passage. The friends felt that their plan had come to nought and that he had singly outwitted all of them. They came to the brink of disappointment.

One of them had a brain wave. Taking advantage of the weakness of the man for chess he shouted, "Look how easily you have been checkmated." The man was in an

embarrassing situation of the worst kind, i.e. bare-headed he was extinguishing the smouldering embers of his turban. But the word "checkmate" produced in him a reflex action and he rushed into the room to see how he had been affected adversely. The moment his friends saw his bare head, they burst out into loud laughter and the man understood their trick. He lost some of that hypersensitiveness and the friends did nothing to cause him any embarrassment.

* * *

Marriages in most parts of India are arranged even now by the parents of the bride and the bride-groom. In the past it was entirely the responsibility of the parents. Men with any physical deformity found it difficult to seek the approval of the father of a maid. Maids being regarded beyond the pale of the application of law, the prospective father-in-law thoroughly satisfied himself though only indirectly that the candidate for the hand of his daughter was physically fit. Where a rumour existed as to a physical or other defect in the would-be-groom, the scrutiny was more searching, though still indirect. Not that men with a physical defect were always condemned to bachelorhood. Far from that, but they had to seek a bride several degrees below them in the social hierarchy.

Once upon a time a young man with a limp in his foot was being considered for the hand of a young maid. The go-between had conveyed it to her father that the young man was perfectly normal and invited him to observe the man for himself. The aspirant for marriage had assured the go-between that he could artfully ape the gait of a man with a perfect pair of feet. An appointment was fixed upon. The father of the bride took his position at a place on the roadside and the young man was asked to pass that way unmindful of the observer.

The prospective bridegroom appeared in the street in

a shawl so artfully draped as to cover the limping foot to the very toes. The observer, even though he had concealed his identity, could get no direct evidence of the limp for the moment. Next, he very successfully aped the gait of a normal man by subjecting the toe to some heavier strain. Thus he expected to hoodwink the father of the bride.

The man had hardly walked a few steps in the street when an old friend accosted him. They met after a pretty long time and their hearts swelled with genuine pleasure. They talked for many minutes there and then and parted only reluctantly because the friend was going on an urgent business. The meeting, however, led to bitter consequences because in the joy of friendship the young man had forgotten the mission which led him out of his house. He began to walk with the habitual limp quite long enough to be caught by the secretly placed observer. He attempted the "sleight-of-foot" again but it was too late; for he had already exposed his club-foot.

* * *

It so happened that an officer in public administration exposed a bad social and personal foible, viz., his inveterate stammer. The more he came into touch with his officers or members of the public, the more this weakness came to the forefront. Whenever he was asked to explain something verbally to his superior officers or elucidate anything for the benefit of those subordinate to him, he cut a sorry figure, and the feeling of this deficiency worried him a great deal. He was otherwise very capable and earned the esteem of his officers. To spare himself the mental torture on this account he got himself transferred to an out of the way station where his duties as the captain of a fortress did not expose him to any contact with the public. He was happy indeed at this voluntary exile.

Years rolled by. The old ruler died and was succeeded by another. Ministers and officers changed places but the captain was uniformly happy. One day his fortress was inspected by a new head of the army who was also the younger brother of the ruler. A fitting welcome was to be accorded to the distinguished visitor.

In keeping with the accepted protocol the captain invited the headmen of villages and other distinguished people of the locality to a reception held under a grand *shamiana*. A detachment of troops stood phalanxed and guns were fired to welcome and salute the prince. In a few moments the visitor took his seat of honour and the captain stood by him in respect and awe. The captain was called upon to conduct the deliberations of the reception and to explain to the distinguished audience the significance of the visit of the prince. It was an ordeal for him but he had to shoulder this exacting task. He began, and at the very fifth word he stammered and stuttered. He made an effort to steer clear but how could he help the habit of a life-time. Hardly had he spoken a couple of sentences when the prince frowned, beckoned to one of his aides and motioned to him to handcuff the stammering captain.

The commands of so distinguished a man as the army chief were carried out instantaneously. The captain, handcuffed and chained, was cast into prison in one of the subterranean cells of the fortress. The captain was fairly popular at his headquarters and the people who had come for the reception took amiss the treatment accorded to him, but "mum" was the word. The situation was tense and the function came to a premature end, but nobody knew why the captain was thus incarcerated. Some hazarded the guess that it was because of disloyalty, others thought he was hatching a conspiracy, but no one could say anything with confidence. All the same, everybody was extremely sorry for the fate of the captain.

The personal staff of the captain who waited on the

prince felt equally sad. One of them, a man of common-sense and imagination who performed odd jobs for the prince, soon made a guess. He discovered that the prince was a stammerer himself and that the captain was punished because he was suspected, most probably, of feigning stammering. To his mind this fact had injured the *amour propre* of the prince and if he could be convinced that the foible in the tongue was native to the captain, he might be pardoned.

These people sought the intercession of some aged head-men and venerable priests of the locality and the subject was broached first to the lieutenants of the army chief and later to him direct. The chief never suspected that the humble captain suffered from the same defect as he, an august prince, himself. He, therefore, had concluded that the captain aimed at insulting him by feigning to stammer and the wages for the deed was incarceration. The evidence of these disinterested people convinced the visiting dignitary of the innocence of the captain and he was once again given the command of the fortress.

* * *

There lived a poet in Kashmir about a hundred years ago. He was very popular for he entertained one and all with his spontaneous verses, humorous or satiric, full of sparkling wit and repartee. Men of means willingly extended their patronage to him, partly out of their love for the muse and partly out of an apprehension lest the poet's battery of sarcasm may otherwise be directed against them. Feudal lords gave him grants of paddy in return for which he sometimes recited panegyrics in their honour.

Once upon a time he called on a nobleman who was a big landlord and held an eminent appointment in public administration. Having been informed of the poet's arrival the nobleman received him in his audience chamber. The poet as usual entertained the nobleman

with the creation of his fancy which was sparkling with wit, sarcasm and humour. His felicity of epithet and diction was appreciated.

After the intellectual repast was over the poet said, "Last night I had a dream, my lord."

"What was it about?"

"I had the honour of meeting my lord, your late departed father."

"And what did the nobleman tell you?"

"He told me that I should get from your lordship thirty *khirwars* of paddy. I have come here to convey his commands to your lordship and to request you to carry it out," said the poet.

There was an outburst of laughter. Even the nobleman could not help laughing, though the joke was obviously against him. Trying to be even with the poet, however, he said, "I also saw him in a dream last night."

"And what was his pleasure?" asked the poet.

"He commanded me to have thirty lashes given on your bare back," retorted the nobleman with obvious glee.

There was once again loud laughter and the nobleman was almost hilarious for having put the poet in the wrong. But the latter was not to be outdone. He was nothing if not a past master in repartee. He retorted, "Is that so my lord? I am surprised that he continues to be a double-dealer, pretending to be friendly to everyone but true to none. How else is it that what he told me is contrary to the instructions given to you?"

The nobleman lost the contest in wit and the poet had the last laugh.

* * *

Though there is a reunion of cousins of several removes on the occasion of a wedding or bereavement, the feelings of envy and rivalry are always uppermost in one's mind

against one's fellow-collaterals, cousins descended from the same paternal grandfather, great-grandfather and great great-grandfather. An idea of the intensity and bitterness of these feelings can be gauged from one or two maxims current about the theme: "If you drop a cousin into a well with his head downwards he will still express his enmity for you with his legs." "If your cousin is so small in stature as not to be able to hit you on any vital part of the body, he will still manage to scratch and injure your legs." Harming a collateral in any form always gives a subtle satisfaction.

In a village lived two brothers. One of them died unexpectedly before they had divided their ancestral property and the moral duty of looking after his brother's children fell upon the surviving uncle. He proved to be a typical "uncle" and his nephews had to put up with harsh treatment at his hands. When they grew up to be young men and could dispense with the officious attention of their so-called guardian, he imposed many obstacles in the way of the division of the ancestral property. He managed to retain a slice of their land for himself. The nephews reconciled themselves to this loss in the hope that they would be able to live a life free from the daily pin-pricks.

Once they were free from their uncle's clutches, he invented fresh means of persecution. By this time the nephews also had imbibed the spirit of "cousinhood" and they also retaliated as far as they could, but the uncle was a past master in this art and had the finesse. It was a regular "cat and mice" life discussed all over the village.

In course of time the uncle grew old. He had seen enough of life and was pretty well satisfied with the role he had been able to play. But he had obviously not satiated his heart with the sadistic persecution of his immediate nearest collaterals, the children of his brother. He wanted to do something really topping. Some time

later he fell seriously ill and he felt that he would not survive that illness. He would not mind his death but his yearning was still not quite satisfied. He thought of a plan and executed it.

He called his nephews and heaving a deep sigh addressed them thus: "Children of my dear brother who is treading the path of truth! I have not been fair to you. It weighs heavily upon my heart that you suffered at my hands. Would you be so good as to forgive me?"

The nephews were overcome with emotion and said, "Dear uncle, let bygones be bygones. We don't want you to feel that you did us any wrong."

"No", he said, "nothing will give me relief until you do something by way of vengeance to be reckoned against you in the eyes of God. I would count it a favour if you drag me by the feet on the bare ground."

The nephews were nonplussed but he importuned them and they were persuaded to oblige their old uncle. He was already counting his last breaths and the strain in being dragged by the feet proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. The old uncle gave up his ghost and the nephews felt they had made peace with their uncle. But their satisfaction was short-lived, for the police soon persecuted them on the charge of culpable homicide. The people said that the uncle had at last done something really topping and bagged the highest prize.

GLOSSARY

Glossary

Amarnath Ji, Cave of	The famous cave about 80 miles from Srinagar where images of ice symbolic of Shiva wax and wane with the moon. Oppressed by the demons the gods prayed to Shiva who appeared before them here and gave them nectar.
Bakhshees	Tips.
Basmati	A fine variety of rice.
Begar	Forced Labour.
Bhand	Itinerant actor of the traditional type.
Bishta	Sound made to drive away a cat.
Bostan	together with *Gulistan*, well-known poetical work in Persian of Saadi of Shiraz, for long favourite with the intellectual classes in Kashmir.
Chakaldar	Official entrusted with the collection of land tax in the past.
Doongha	A commodious boat used in the past as a convenient means of transport.
Durbar	Audience held by a ruling chief.
Girdawar	An inspector of land under whom patwaris work.
Gulistan	See *Bostan*.
Gundam numa	
Jao farosh	One selling barley for wheat.
Hakim (hakeem)	A physician.
Hakim-e-ala	Head of a provincial administration.
Jagirdar	One enjoying the revenue of an estate either conferred upon or inherited by him.
Jogi	A master of the science of yoga; a *sanyasi*.
Kabab	Roastmeat.
Kabargah	A choice meat dish.
Kamraz	The northern half of the valley of Kashmir.

Kangri	The portable firepot used extensively in Kashmir consisting of an earthenware bowl set in a wickerwork case.
Kanji	Fermented preparation from gruel rich in vitamins.
Kapas	Cotton.
Kardar	Official entrusted with the collection of land tax in the past.
Khatumband	A style in ceilings made of small pieces of wood set in grooves in geometric patterns.
Khirwar	A measure of weight about 166 lbs., literally an ass-load.
Khwaja Saheb	Title prefixed to the name of a bourgeois Mohammadan.
Kotwal	Head of the police station.
Kuvera	In the Hindu pantheon the treasurer of the gods.
Ladhaki chai	Brick-tea formerly imported from Ladakh or Tibet.
Maharaj ki jai	Victory to the great ruler.
Mahakali	The consort of Siva in the fierce form in which she killed a demon.
Mahseer	An uncommon variety of fish.
Maktab	A school of the traditional type.
Malmal	Muslin, turban made of muslin.
Manut	Literally a measure of 3 pounds of weight.
Maraz	The southern half of the valley of Kashmir.
Marla	A measure of area, about 1/160 of an acre.
Mashir-i-mal	Revenue minister, head of the revenue administration.
Mengan	Sheep or goat-dung.
Munshi	A clerk, a confidential clerk.
Mushkabudji	A fine and choice variety of rice.
Nalamar	A canal in Srinagar.
Nambardar	Village headman.
Narela	A small handy smoking apparatus of the Indian pattern.
Naat	Hymn in praise of the Prophet of Islam.
Nazar	A gift or tribute offered to a ruler, etc. as a token of allegiance.
Pampur	The famous plateau, eight miles from Srinagar, where the finest saffron is grown.
Pandit	The title prefixed to the name of a Brahman of Kashmir, a learned man.

Pashmina	Cloth made of the finest wool of Ladakhi and Tibetan goats.
Patwari	The accountant of land tax at the village level.
Panzuv	Literally a measure of six pounds of weight.
Pheran	Long, commodious apron worn by Kashmiri men and women, especially in winter.
Pilau	A delicious dish of rice, butter, meat, etc. highly relished.
Purdah	Veil.
Qualamdan	A small but artistic pen-tray-cum-inkpot formerly very much in fashion.
Qawali	A religious song sung in chorus.
Qazi	Judge.
Resident	British political officer in States in India ruled till 1947 by Indian princes.
Rakh	A game-preserve.
Ravan	The many-headed king of Lanka killed by Rama.
Rogan josh	A dish of meat fried dark brown and highly spiced.
Sati	Self-immolation by Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband.
Sag	Cooked green leaves.
Shabrang	Dark in complexion, of the colour of night.
Shamiana	A large canopy over a gathering or assembly.
Shawl	A fine fabric of pashmina wool for which Kashmir is famous, used by the upper class Kashmiris.
Shah Hamdan	A religious leader of Muslims who came to Kashmir from Hamdan in Central Asia in the fifteenth century. His name is held in great reverence in Kashmir.
Sheikh	Headman, nobleman.
Shikar	Hunting.
Shikara	Light skiff used for quick transport over the waterways in Kashmir.
Shivaratri	A festival of the Hindus celebrating the wedding of Shiva and Parvati. It is of great importance in Kashmir.
Shradha	Oblation to one's ancestors on his or her death anniversary.
Somavar	Tea-kettle of Russian origin found in every Kashmiri home.

Tehsil	A sub-division of a district.
Tehsildar	A sub-divisional collector.
Thug	A swindler.
Toh	Paddy husk.
Toshakhana	State reception department.
Tumboknari	An earthenware pipe mounted with sheep-skin on the wider head and used as a drum in Kashmir.
Wazir	A minister or head of the State Administration.
Wazir-i-wazarat	Deputy commissioner or collector of a district.
Zamindar	A big land owner engaging tenants or cultivators.